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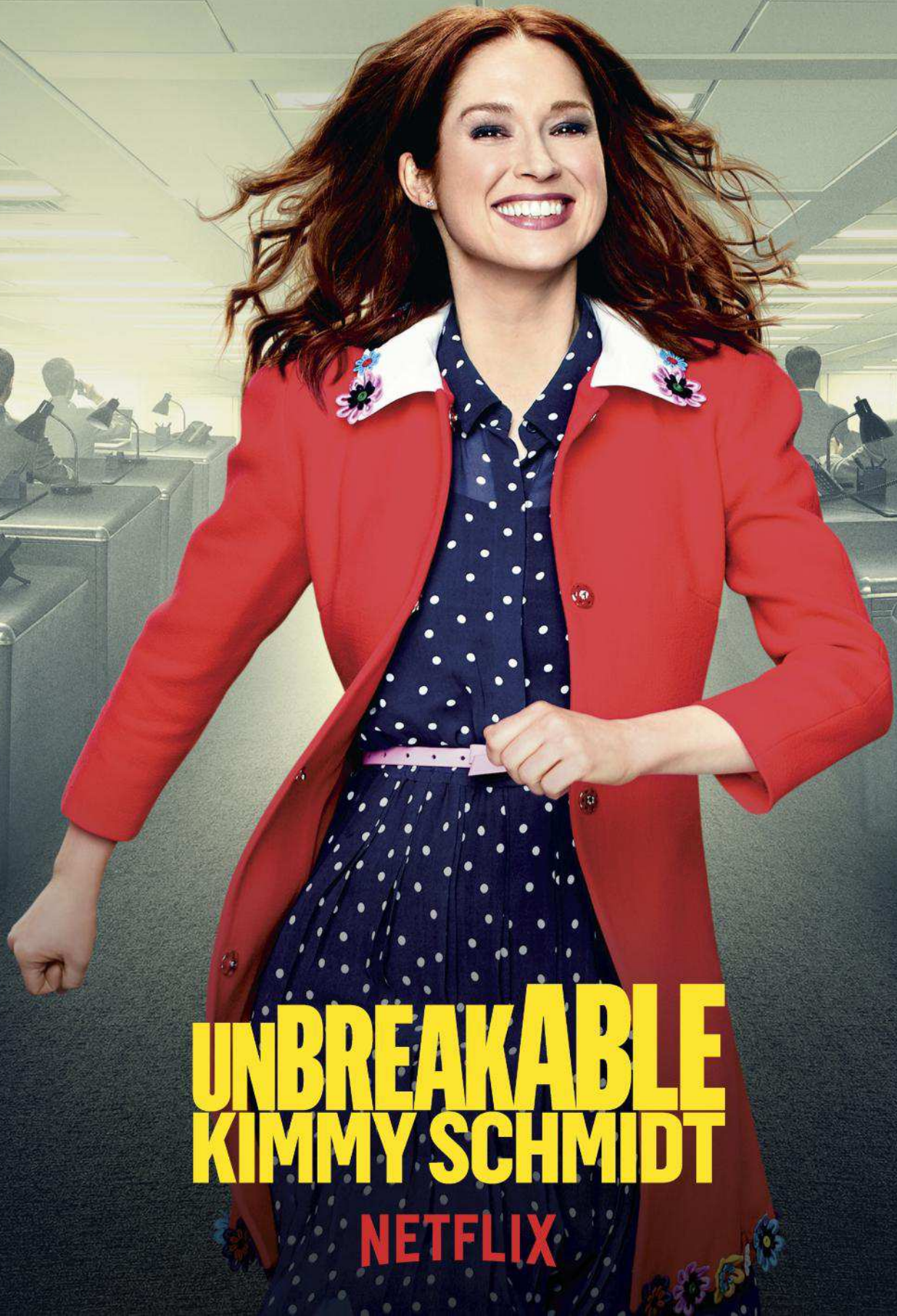
JUNE 18, 2018

# NEW YORKER





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# THE NEW YORKER

JUNE 18, 2018

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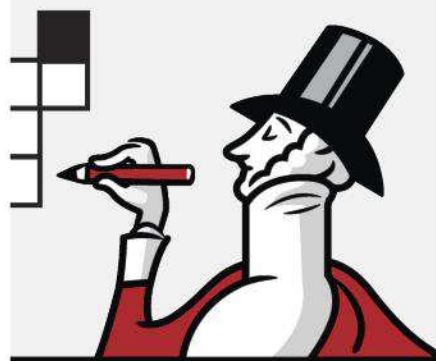
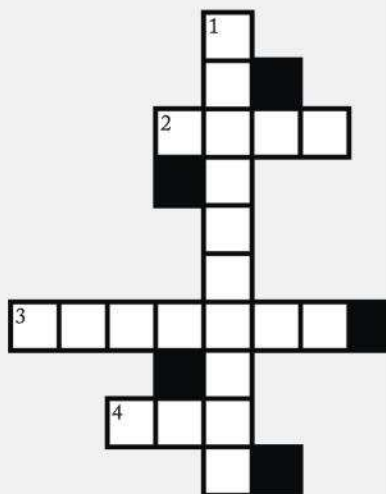
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## Introducing The New Yorker Crossword Puzzle



1. Schmaltz, literally.
2. Stud alternative.
3. A 1928 Virginia Woolf "biography."
4. "A ludicrous invention," per Germaine Greer.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Rebecca Mead** (*"Meal Ticket,"* p. 46) has been a staff writer since 1997. "My Life in Middlemarch" is her latest book.

**Adam Entous** (*"The Enemy of My Enemy,"* p. 30) recently joined the magazine as a staff writer. Previously, he was a reporter for the *Washington Post*.

**Evan Osnos** (*Comment,* p. 13) writes about politics and foreign affairs for the magazine. His book "Age of Ambition" won the 2014 National Book Award for nonfiction.

**Sarah Larson** (*The Talk of the Town,* p. 16) is a staff writer. Her column, Podcast Dept., appears weekly on *newyorker.com*.

**Nick Flynn** (*Poem,* p. 52) will publish his next poetry collection, "I Will Destroy You," in 2019.

**Christoph Niemann** (*Cover*) is the author of "Conversations," with Nicholas Blechman, and "Souvenir."

**Louis Menand** (*"Nowhere to Hide,"* p. 24), a staff writer since 2001, was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Obama in 2016.

**Weike Wang** (*Fiction,* p. 56) is the author of the novel "Chemistry," which this year won the PEN/Hemingway Award and the Whiting Award in fiction.

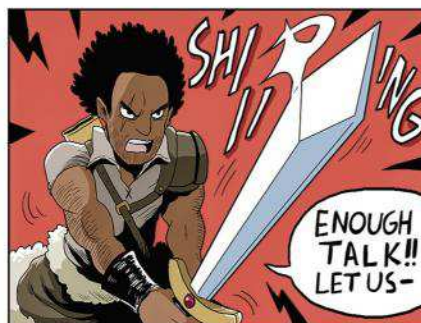
**George Packer** (*Books,* p. 70), a staff writer, is the author of "The Unwinding" and seven other books.

**Sarah Holland-Batt** (*Poem,* p. 61) most recently published "The Hazards," which won Australia's 2016 Prime Minister's Literary Award for poetry.

**Anthony Lane** (*Books,* p. 64; *The Current Cinema,* p. 76), a film critic for the magazine since 1993, published his writings for *The New Yorker* in the 2003 collection "Nobody's Perfect."

**D. T. Max** (*"Posts Modern,"* p. 18) is a staff writer and the author of "Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace."

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



### DAILY SHOUTS

A comic by Eric Lide shows an encounter with the Lord of All Evil gone awry.



### PHOTO BOOTH

A Japanese photographer documents the life of his seven-person family in a one-room home.

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JUNE 13 – 19, 2018

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Is each of us one person or, over the course of a lifetime, many? Tracy Letts, who wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning drama “August: Osage County,” takes on this existential riddle in “**Mary Page Marlowe**” (starting previews June 19, at Second Stage). The play charts the life of an Ohio accountant, moving back and forth through time, with six actresses playing the title character at different ages (clockwise, from left): Tatiana Maslany, Kellie Overbey, Blair Brown, Susan Pourfar, Emma Geer, and Mia Sinclair Jenness.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC



## "Bodys Isek Kingelez: City Dreams"

Museum of Modern Art

The Congolese sculptor, who died in 2015, is the subject of a phenomenal exhibition, curated by Sarah Suzuki and wonderfully installed with help from the German artist Carsten Höller. It presents scores of imaginary buildings and cities made mostly of cut and painted paper, card stock, and plastics, with occasional urban detritus (used packaging, bottle caps, soda cans). In shape, these "extreme maquettes," as Kingelez termed them, are variously tiered, towering, serpentine, pinnate, finned, and scalloped. Colon-nades and grand staircases abound, as do decorative grids of circles, stripes, diamonds, stars, and floral motifs. Kingelez was a great and subtle colorist, with a palette anchored by the red, yellow, and green of the national flag of Zaïre—he once said, "A building without color is like a naked person." Kinships with craftwork, toys, folk or outsider art, and bricolage inevitably suggest themselves, only to be plowed under by the rigor of an aesthetic as sophisticated as that of Alexander Calder or Joseph Cornell.—*Peter Schjeldahl* (Through Jan. 1, 2019.)

## "Huma Bhabha: We Come in Peace"

Metropolitan Museum

Two monumental bronze figures—one eighteen feet long and prostrate, either in prayer or in fear, the other a twelve-foot-tall alien—provide a triumphant coda to "Like Life," the museum's deep dive into the history of polychrome sculpture at the Met Breuer. Both were cast from works that Bhabha made in her Poughkeepsie studio using lo-fi materials. The standing figure was first carved from Styrofoam and cork; the bronze version is finished in a pan-gender patina of pink, blue, and scorched earth, with a demonic face where it ought to have genitals and pink nipples on its buttocks. Graffiti-like marks in red, green, and yellow flicker at its heels. The supplicant, first fashioned from unfired clay, has outstretched hands extending from a shroud of black plastic, at once a burqa, a body bag, and a collected bundle of trash. Together, Bhabha's characters fuse centuries of sculptural traditions with political and pop-culture references—Rodin waylaid by Rastafarians, in a dream of Samuel R. Delany's.—*Andrea K. Scott* (Through Oct. 28.)

## Jeneen Frei Njootli Fierman

**DOWNTOWN** Conceptual precision, chance, and deeply personal references align rather magically in this spare show. On opening night, the artist, a member of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, in Canada, staged an improvised performance in which baseball caps (customized with horsehair, rickrack, porcupine quills, and other materials) served as both costumes and instruments. At one point, she dragged a veil of thin chains hanging from one brim over a cymbal, adding a silvery note to her amplified voice. Now the hats adorn the walls as sculptures, alongside larger-than-life-size photographs printed on

vinyl. In these powerful images, the geometric patterns of a beaded garment have left indentations on expanses of Frei Njootli's bare skin, underscoring the indelible trace of her heritage on her life and her work.—*Johanna Fateman* (Through June 22.)

## Wade Guyton Petzel

**CHELSEA** Not since Bruce Nauman shot forty-five hours of videotape in his New Mexico studio and screened it, in all its triumphant banality, at the Dia Art Center, in 2002, has an American artist so masterfully pulled back the veil on the reality and the residue of his work. Looking for mystic truths? You won't find them in the eleven new paintings here, printed by inkjet on twelve-foot-high swaths of linen from iPhone photographs that Guyton took in his space on the Bowery. The scale may be epic, but the subjects are antiheroic—portraits of a day-to-day process in which lunch is eaten, unstretched paintings lie piled on the floor, and trash cans wait to be emptied. It's a strangely beautiful meditation on the process of making art, in which nothing and everything happens.—*A.K.S.* (Through June 16.)

## Kensuke Koike Postmasters

**DOWNTOWN** The Japanese artist, who is based in Venice, Italy, has his cake and eats it, too, taking scissors to vintage postcards and photographs in winsome pocket-size works that feel nostalgic for the pre-digital age, but which he also films in process and uploads to social media. (In the gallery, the altered art works intermingle with their video documentation.) The cut-up pictures have an endearingly goofy, Surrealist bent. A horse becomes an elephant with a collaged back leg in lieu of a trunk; a blue-eyed infant is re-

arranged into an "Ikebana Baby Rose." Seeing the artist's hands manipulating the pictures on-screen is most effective when the results are a punch line, as when he tears into a postcard of a woman holding a cigarette, creating a white stream of smoke.—*A.K.S.* (Through June 23.)

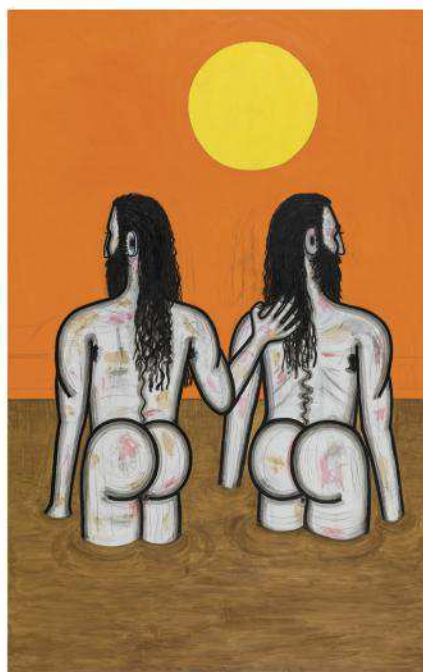
## Michelangelo Lovelace Fort Gansevoort

**CHELSEA** Almost forty years after he started painting, in Cleveland, at the age of nineteen, Lovelace makes his impressive New York debut with sixteen trenchant depictions of local life, from a P-Funk party and a political rally to an allegory of gun violence. Most of the images integrate text (on billboards, church signs, and T-shirts) into teeming street scenes, suggesting an unexpected alliance of two other Ohio-bred greats, Jenny Holzer and George Bellows. Lovelace attended art school for a time, in the nineteen-eighties, but had to sideline his studies for financial reasons, not the least of them fatherhood. He now supports his family as a nurse's aide, but he has never stopped making art. The vibrant and prismatically structured acrylic-on-canvas works in "The Land" (the show's title and Cleveland's nickname) bring to mind Charles Baudelaire's classic description of a painter of modern life: "a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness."—*A.K.S.* (Through June 30.)

## Rammellzee Red Bull Studios

**CHELSEA** There's more to the underground New York legend than the graffiti for which he's best known. Rammellzee, who died in 2010, at the age of forty-nine, was a rapper, a sculptor, a performance artist, and a philosopher, who lived in accordance with an elaborate cosmology he called "gothic futurism." His tags began to appear on New York subways in the nineteen-seventies,

## AT THE GALLERIES



**Carroll Dunham** is one of the best living American painters. He is also, almost defiantly, one of the weirdest. In his latest show, at the Gladstone gallery through June 16, Dunham continues to wrestle with his one true subject—painting itself—in Crayola-bright pictures of cavemen, going head to head in the wild in Greco-Roman-style combat. ("Mud Men," shown here, is the only hint of détente.) Dunham's male nudes are as anatomically, if cartoonishly, frank as his previous depictions of female bathers, which challenged Gustave Courbet's "Origin of the World" to a duel. The figures remain at once insistently flat (like the linen they're made on) and allusively dimensional, an antic update of Cézanne's advice to "deal with nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone."—*Andrea K. Scott*



Typically a balmy summer treat, the Public's Shakespeare in the Park series made national headlines last year with its Trumped-up "Julius Caesar." Unless Roseanne Barr plays Desdemona, there likely won't be a similar fracas surrounding this season's first offering, **"Othello"** (through June 24). But Ruben Santiago-Hudson's production does retain at least one element from the last go-round: Corey Stoll, who played Brutus and returns as Iago, a different sort of troublemaker. In the title role is the Nigerian-British actor Chukwudi Iwuj, who appeared at the Delacorte in 2014, as Edgar in "King Lear."—*Michael Schulman*

and, while his street art has long since disappeared, decades of his paintings on cardboard and canvas trace the evolution of his radical style: a deconstructive, aerosol-based update of the illuminated manuscript. The show, titled "Racing for Thunder," also includes an installation of "Letter Racers," from 1988-91—bright, menacing found-object sculptures mounted on skateboards—and a battalion of "Garbage Gods," the armor-like costumes he began to design in the nineties. This vibrant retrospective allows Ramellzee's visionary *Gesamtkunstwerk* to orbit a planet of art, music, and night life, without ever bringing it down to earth.—*J.F. (Through Aug. 26.)*

## THE THEATRE

### The Boys in the Band

#### Booth

Mart Crowley's pathbreaking 1968 play is a fascinating document of New York gay life pre-Stonewall, and this fiftieth-anniversary revival offers much to contemplate about what's changed (anxious jokes about "Lily Law") and what hasn't ("All About Eve" references). Set at

a birthday party where the zingers tip into recrimination and self-loathing, the play luxuriates in campy theatrics while underscoring the costs of marginalization—doubly so for Bernard (Michael Benjamin Washington), the black character whom someone calls "the queen of spades." All the actors in Joe Mantello's crowd-pleasing production are openly gay, some of them familiar faces from TV, including Jim Parsons, Andrew Rannells, and Matt Bomer. Their presence is a marker of progress, of course, but distracting when celebrity mugging takes over; as the self-described "pockmarked Jew fairy," Zachary Quinto stops the show cold with every withering pronouncement. The actors who do listen to each other bring life to Crowley's thorny and funny script—particularly Robin De Jesús, as the resident flamer, Emory, whose defiance shows glimmers of what would soon be called pride.—*Michael Schulman (Through Aug. 11.)*

### Dan Cody's Yacht

#### City Center Stage I

Cara (Kristen Bush) is an "incorruptible" English teacher at a Massachusetts public school—at least according to Kevin (Rick Holmes), whose son, one of Cara's students, just got an F on a

"Great Gatsby" paper. A private-equity shark, Kevin tries throwing cash on her desk, and when that doesn't work he offers something more intriguing: advice on how to play the stock market and, perhaps, make a better life for her daughter. The moral lines are neatly drawn—suitable for crossing—in Anthony Giardina's class-minded drama, part of a recent abundance of plays in which school admissions bring out the worst in people. Under Doug Hughes's direction, for Manhattan Theatre Club, Giardina's entry is all clashing perspectives, no soul or spontaneity; even the teen-age characters seem like points on an ethical matrix.—*M.S. (Through July 8.)*

### The Fourth Wall

#### A.R.T./New York Theatres

A. R. Gurney dipped his toes in Ionesco-esque waters with this 1992 absurdist comedy, now unevenly revived by Theatre Breaking Through Barriers (which features actors with disabilities) under Christopher Burris's direction. The concept involves a woman named Peggy (Ann Marie Morelli), who expresses her existential-political crisis through interior design: she's moved her living-room furniture to face a blank back wall, and suddenly people entering the space spout meta-commentaries on their own actions. Unsurprisingly, this annoys her husband, Roger (Nicholas Viselli), so he calls on a sophisticated friend (Pamela Sabaugh) and a theatre professor (Stephen Drabicki), who may be able to regulate the stream of addresses to the audience. Occasionally, they all break into Cole Porter songs, which have endured better than the now dated references to the Bush Administration that Gurney added in 2002 revisions. In the end, the show feels like an overextended joke in search of a punch line.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through June 23.)*

### The Great Leap

#### Atlantic Stage 2

Lauren Yee's ambitious new play toggles between 1971 and 1989, Beijing and San Francisco. Linking them are Saul (Ned Eisenberg), an American college-basketball coach, and his translator turned rival, Wen Chang (B. D. Wong). Stuck in the middle is the brash young street-hoops whiz Manford (the one-note Tony Aidan Vo), who rules the Chinatown courts in 1989 but has his eye on a bigger stage—and a mysterious score to settle. Manford is inspired by Yee's own father, and she frames that personal story against the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square. The director, Taibi Magar, deftly handles the switches in time and setting, but too often the writing has a mechanical, overly neat quality. Only Wen Chang's character feels fully fleshed out, and Wong does him justice, subtly suggesting the emotions raging under a carefully controlled exterior.—*E.V. (Through June 24.)*

### Secret Life of Humans

#### 59E59

The British playwright and director David Byrne presents what is essentially a battle of ideas between Jacob Bronowski (Richard Delaney), the mathematician and broadcaster who wrote and narrated the deeply optimistic 1973 BBC series "The Ascent of Man," and Yuval Noah Harari, the author of the 2014 best-seller "Sapiens," whose



take on the species is decidedly more skeptical. This cerebral concept assumes the fleshly form of a one-night stand between Bronowski's (fictional) grandson, Jamie (Andrew Strafford-Baker), and a university lecturer named Ava (Stella Taylor), who serves as the vehicle for Harari's ideas. Together they discover a disturbing secret that Bronowski kept locked in his basement, which makes a handy proxy for the worst horrors of humanity. There's a lot going on for a ninety-minute play, and, though not every thread fully connects, Byrne's stagecraft is arresting.—*Rollo Romig* (Through July 1.)

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

### New York Philharmonic: Concerts in the Parks

Various locations  
Performing alfresco in Van Cortlandt Park, Central Park, Cunningham Park, and Prospect Park, the orchestra plays a sequence of irresistible dance numbers by Saint-Saëns, Bernstein, and two preteens from the company's Very Young Composers program. James Gaffigan conducts Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade," a rapturous evocation of four tales from "A Thousand and One Nights." The tour concludes with an indoor gig, at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, in Staten Island.—*Oussama Zahr* (June 12-15 at 8; June 17 at 3.)

### James Ilgenfritz The Stone at the New School

Ilgenfritz, a bassist who has made invaluable contributions to New York's new-music community as a composer, improviser, collaborator, and organizer, is the center of attention each night during this five-concert residency. But, with characteristic magnanimity, he'll share the spotlight with the Anagram Ensemble, the New Thread Quartet, and his bandmates in the high-voltage improvising trio Hypercolor, among numerous others—and that's to say nothing of the promising débuts and premières at hand during this exciting engagement.—*Steve Smith* (June 12-16 at 8:30.)

### New York City Opera: "Madama Butterfly"

Bryant Park  
The city's second opera company braves the evening rush to stage an hour's worth of excerpts from Puccini's lyrical drama for the after-work crowd. On the park's upper terrace, Brandie Sutton and Alex Richardson take the lead roles, and Kathryn Olander plays piano.—*O.Z.* (June 13 at 6.)

### Metropolitan Opera: Summer Recital Series

Brooklyn Bridge Park  
Much like your typical New Yorker, the Met heads straight for the city's parks as soon as summer hits. Throughout June, the company's free outdoor concert series will take it to all five boroughs. In Brooklyn, the soprano Latonia Moore, the tenor Mario Chang, and the

baritone Joshua Hopkins sing a crowd-pleasing program of arias and duets from "Il Barbiere di Siviglia," "Gianni Schicchi," "La Traviata," and other works; the pianist Dan Saunders accompanies them.—*O.Z.* (June 13 at 7.)

### Modern Piano (+) Spectrum

The parenthetical "plus" in the title is a nod to the talented Serbian pianist and composer Teodora Stepančić, whose monthly "Piano+" salons provide the template for this ambitious recital series. On opening night, Reinier van Houdt offers his authoritative interpretation of Michael Pisaro's contemplative "Green Hour, Grey Future," and Tanner Porter sings original art songs that are by turns seductive and confessional. Other concerts this week feature Stepančić, her fellow-pianist Hitomi Honda, and the duos Early Gray and Righteous Girls; following weeks include performances by Blair McMillen, Jacob Rhodebeck, Ethan Iverson, and Dan Tepfer.—*S.S.* (June 14 at 7:30 and 9, June 16 at 6 and 8:30, June 17 at 3, and June 19 at 7:30. Through July 1.)

### "Lines of Light" Roulette

Amirtha Kidambi, a vocalist and composer who slips easily among disparate musical idioms, presents the world premiere of a work inspired by two visionary forebears: the medieval mystic Hildegard von Bingen and the experimental-jazz patriarch Muhal Richard Abrams. Developed in collaboration with the vocal improvisers Jean Carla Rodea, Anaïs Maviel, Emilie Lesbros, and Charmaine Lee, the piece speaks of life, death, and

motherhood, and provides space for each singer's distinct approach. Beforehand, in a new duo with the crafty electronic composer Lea Bertucci, Kidambi will respond on the fly to manipulated tape recordings of her own voice.—*S.S.* (June 17 at 8.)

### "Time's Arrow" St. Paul's Chapel

Julian Wachner, Trinity Wall Street's industrious director of music and the arts, credits a 1990 lecture by the Boston-based composer Marti Epstein with directing his attention toward Anton Webern's crystalline serialism. Returning the favor, Wachner is using this Webern-centric festival to bring wider notice to Epstein's splendidly luminous music. Additional composers featured in the string of free concerts—performed by the Trinity Choir, the new-music ensemble Novus NY, and others—include Heinz Holliger, Christopher Rouse, and Brahms, whose "German Requiem" shares the final program with some of Webern's grandest works.—*S.S.* (June 18-19, June 21, and June 23 at 1.)

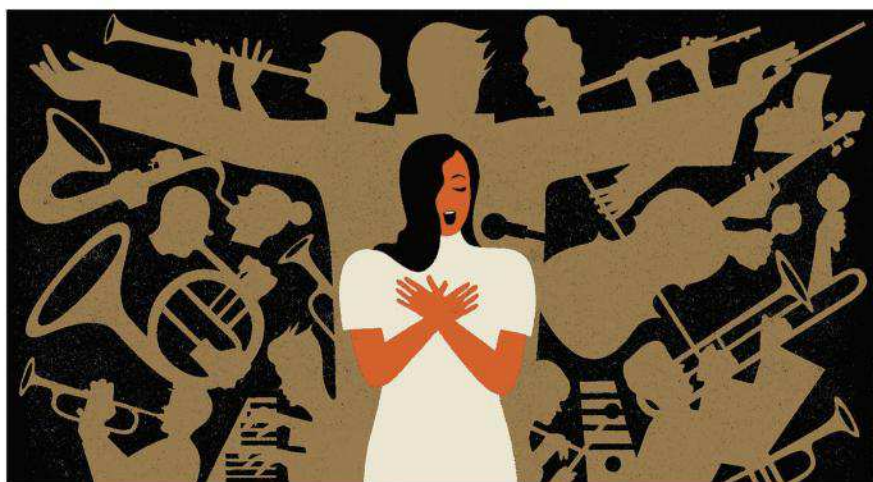
## NIGHT LIFE

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

### Lucinda Williams, Steve Earle, and Dwight Yoakam Beacon Theatre

Dubbed the LSD Tour, this road show of twangy music veterans has at least one aspect

## THE SUMMER SEASON



**Audra McDonald**—a radiant singer, protean actor, and record-breaking winner of six Tony Awards—has a voice that defies categorization. It possesses the pealing tone and pure upper register of Broadway's more classically inclined sopranos, and the fullness and emotional punch of its brassiest belters. She opens Caramoor's summer season, in Katonah, N.Y., on June 16 with a concert of American standards, accompanied by the Orchestra of St. Luke's. On the following afternoon, the composer and percussionist Andy Akiho joins the orchestral collective the Knights to play his "Fantasy for Steel Pans and Orchestra," which has the sweep and specificity of a film score.—*Oussama Zahr*

that is truly hallucinatory: the degree to which its headliners are keyed to the sounds coming out of contemporary Nashville. Although all three resided in Music City at some point in their careers, their intimate relationships with genres like the blues (Williams), folk (Earle), and rock (Yoakam) have transcended geography and invited a variety of listeners into honky-tonks. It's not an overstatement to say that each bears some responsibility for the "alternative" part of the term "alt-country," even if there remains plenty of the mythology of the South and the West in their collective catalogue of tunes about outlaws, highways, and complicated love.—*K. Leander Williams* (June 13.)

## METZ Liberty Belle

This three-piece rock outfit from Toronto constructs songs out of heavy slabs of noise, but, as with marble, it's the crystalline details—the raucous drums anchoring the guitar distortion, the textures animating their wall of sound—that hold your attention. They're at their most visceral when experienced live, and this performance, on New York City's popular party riverboat (no "rock the boat" jokes, please), is one of a kind, indeed.—*K.L.W.* (June 14.)

## Eddie Palmieri Salsa Orchestra Sony Hall

A giant of música Latina, the pianist, composer, arranger, and bandleader Eddie Palmieri has spent the past six decades fusing idiomatic musical sources from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Caribbean with modern jazz, producing imaginative and inexorably propulsive sounds in the process. A formidable improviser himself, Palmieri sets the tone for his razor-sharp, rhythmically effervescent ensemble.—*Steve Futterman* (June 14.)

## Jack DeJohnette, Ravi Coltrane, and Matthew Garrison Shapeshifter Lab

The transcendent spirit of John Coltrane binds the trio of his saxophonist son Ravi, the electric bassist Garrison (the scion of Jimmy Garrison, the bassist in Coltrane's classic quartet of the sixties), and DeJohnette, a prodigious modern drummer and bandleader indelibly influenced by Coltrane (and who, in 1966, sat in on a gig with the icon).—*S.F.* (June 15.)

## Kamasi Washington Forest Hills Stadium

In another lifetime, the saxophonist Washington might have been a film director specializ-

ing in grandiose productions; his upcoming release, "Heaven and Earth," the follow-up to his sprawling calling card, "The Epic," is similarly ambitious, and socially conscious. Drawing on the inclusive spirit of seventies soul jazz and utilizing massed strings, vocals, and a contingent of eclectic improvisers, Washington creates his effect by painting with sweeping brushstrokes.—*S.F.* (June 15.)

## The Magnetic Fields Apollo Theatre

Stephin Merritt has built a devoted fan base for his band the Magnetic Fields by sheer force of will. He's always been a pop outlier; his voice, an affectingly nasalized baritone, is particularly out of step with the current age of talent-competition-driven exuberance. His melodies, however—a significant number of which have been delivered in multiple-album song cycles—are so richly crafted that their catchiness is seductive. Last year, the band released "50 Song Memoir," a five-disk package of autobiographical material that contained a tune for each of the first fifty years of Merritt's life—some sweet, some arsenic-laced, others jokey, all revealing. The group settles in at the Apollo for two nights, with an elaborate staging of the work which is part concert, part theatre.—*K.L.W.* (June 15-16.)

## Ethan Iverson and Ron Carter Mezzrow

With older jazz giants leaving us with unfortunate regularity, it must be quite a charge for the historically minded pianist Iverson (late of the Bad Plus) to collaborate with surviving heroes. Here he duets with the masterly bassist Carter, whose work with Miles Davis and on the reported two-thousand-plus recordings he's contributed to has made him a living legend.—*S.F.* (June 15-17.)

## New York Night Train Soul Clap & Dance-Off with Shopping Elsewhere

The d.j. Jonathan Toubin's taste in vintage soul music on vinyl (45 r.p.m. platters, exclusively) has carried this regular dance party and contest for the better part of a decade, but his live music selections are equally notable. Since the festivities moved to Elsewhere, in January, he has hosted the rapper Kool Keith and also the Sun Ra Arkestra. This event imports the excellent U.K. trio Shopping, in which Rachel Aggs's jagged, minimalist guitar cuts across the kind of danceably sparse rhythms pioneered by punkish innovators like Gang of Four and Pylon. Their chants can be political without getting specific. The mantra at the end of "The Hype," last year's single, is still timely: "Don't believe. Ask questions."—*K.L.W.* (June 16.)

## JAZZ, SWING, AND IMPROV



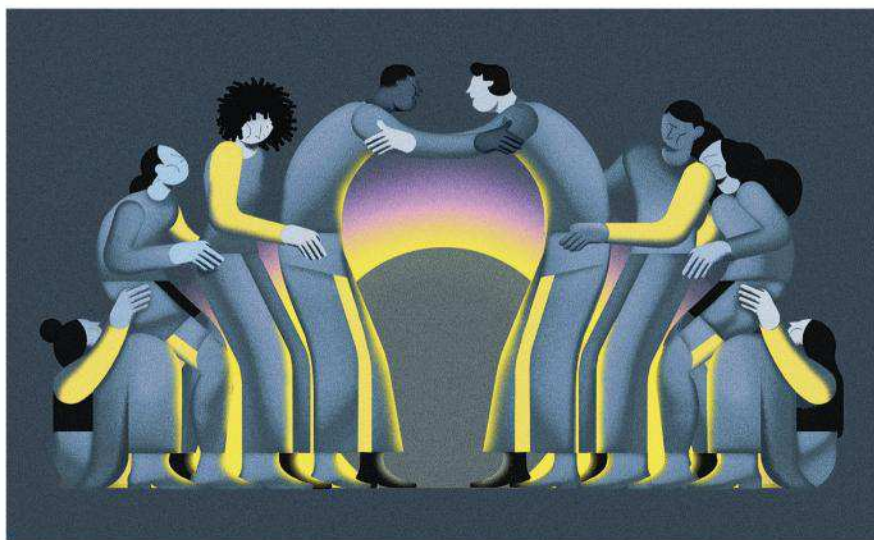
Music is the ultimate lingua franca for **Marc Ribot y los Cubanos Postizos**—debates about authenticity and cultural appropriation be damned. Twenty years ago, Ribot, the guitarist, noise-scene star, and Tom Waits sideman, convened some friends to jam on the tunes of Arsenio Rodriguez, the blind Cuban fingerpicker whose innovations paved the way for the mambo. He ended up with two sleeper-hit albums of loungey music that encourages *bailando*. The all-star band (Brad Jones, E. J. Rodriguez, Anthony Coleman) is back together for one big night at Le Poisson Rouge, on June 17, with the addition of the Cuban drummer Horacio (El Negro) Hernandez.—*K. Leander Williams*

## DANCE

## American Ballet Theatre Metropolitan Opera House

Audiences never tire of "Romeo and Juliet," Shakespeare's tale of teen-age lovers in Re-





Compared with the feast of **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's** ultra-popular winter encampment, its summer season, which runs June 13-17 at the David H. Koch Theatre, is barely a snack, but there is a new item on the menu. It's "EN," by Jessica Lang, a prolific choreographer whose thoughtful craftsmanship is rarely enlivened by a strongly individual voice. More reliably exciting is "Members Don't Get Weary," the maiden choreographic effort for the company by the star dancer Jamar Roberts, which debuted in December and returns this weekend. A persuasively personal response to the rhythmic fervor of Coltrane recordings, it's a nice surprise.—*Brian Seibert*

naissance Verona, or of its lustrous score, by Prokofiev. A.B.T.'s version, by Kenneth MacMillan, is more than half a century old, but it continues to make its point with its violent street scenes, ardent pas de deux, and tear-inducing resolution. Misty Copeland, who first danced Juliet in 2015, returns to the role on June 12 and for the June 16 matinée. Devon Teuscher and Stella Abrera will dance Juliet at the June 13 matinée and on June 14, respectively. Teuscher is a thrilling actress; Abrera, a touching and pure dancer. Teuscher will be partnered by a new Romeo, Aran Bell, only nineteen years old and in the corps de ballet; many will remember him as an eleven-year-old boy in the movie "First Position."—*Marina Harss (June 11-16.)*

### Philadanco! Joyce Theatre

The dancers of this venerable Philadelphia-based group are uncommonly adaptable and spirited. It's too bad that their repertory so often diminishes them. For this visit, the program tilts political. "New Fruit," by the never-subtle Christopher L. Huggins, features a simulated lynching and good times curtailed by gunshot. "A Movement for Five," by Dawn Marie Bazemore, is more abstract, aestheticizing the predicament of the Central Park Five with striking designs. The tone is maudlin, but flashes of rawness occasionally cut through.—*Brian Seibert (June 12-17.)*

### Savion Glover and Marcus Gilmore MetroTech Commons

The BAM R. & B. Festival rarely programs dancers, but Glover, the tap god, has always been more of a musician anyway, better appreciated in a purely musical context. Best of all is to hear him in percussive conversation, and Gilmore, an innovative drummer and a sensitive listener, should make an excellent interlocutor. The two men have at least one thing in common: both have performed with Gilmore's grandfather, the great jazz drummer Roy Haynes.—*B.S. (June 14.)*

### River to River Festival Various locations

Over the course of this annual festival of free, mostly outdoor performances, casual passersby on the streets of downtown New York are treated to the wild imaginations of select experimental dance-theatre artists. On June 15-17, the choreographer Catherine Galasso presents the latest installment in her project based on Boccaccio's "Decameron," "Of Granite and Glass," imagined as a series of nonlinear tableaux. Cori Olinghouse's "Grandma," a melancholy, absurdist reflection on Middle America, takes place at the studios of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. In "Silent::Partner," Enrico D. Wey explores collective memory as represented by monuments like the statue of George Washington in front of Federal Hall. Check [lmcc.net](http://lmcc.net) for dates and locations.—*M.H. (June 15-24.)*

### American Animals

Bart Layton's movie tells a true story, more or less, with an emphasis on the stories that the characters tell themselves, and the inevitable trouble that ensues. The story begins in 2003, in Lexington, Kentucky, where Spencer (Barry Keoghan) and his friend Warren (Evan Peters), students at Transylvania University, decide to steal a precious copy of Audubon's "Birds of America" and a rare edition of Darwin from the college library. Their planning, hopelessly flawed, is further weakened by two new recruits, Eric (Jared Abrahamson) and Chas (Blake Jenner), and, as for the old-guy disguises that they wear for the heist, all you can do is laugh. The film, which kicks off in a flurry of visual tricks and narrative switchbacks, grows plainer in the later stages, and its concluding mood is surprisingly sad; these kids, who yearned to be something special, turned out to be anything but.—*Anthony Lane (In wide release.)*

### First Reformed

Paul Schrader's latest movie is one of his most agonized. Ethan Hawke plays Reverend Toller, who, after the loss of a son and the wrecking of a marriage, has washed up in Albany County, New York. He has a drinking problem, no visible friends, a beautiful old church to preside over, and a scattering of worshippers. One of them, a pregnant woman named Mary (Amanda Seyfried), asks him to counsel her husband, Michael (Philip Ettinger), an ecoterrorist. Toller, to his surprise and ours, is drawn to Michael's cause. Schrader's insistence on his characters' self-denial, and even self-chastisement, feels both brave and cussed, and his story is equipped with a stripped-down style to match. The result has the air of an endurance test, and it might be wise to get in shape with the aid of Ingmar Bergman and Robert Bresson beforehand. With Cedric Kyles, as the pastor of a megachurch.—*A.L. (Reviewed in our issue of 5/21/18.) (In wide release.)*

### How to Talk to Girls at Parties

A silly if sprightly enterprise, adapted by John Cameron Mitchell (who directed) and Philippa Goslett from a story by Neil Gaiman. Alex Sharp, who won a Tony for "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time," plays Enn, a high-school kid in a London suburb in 1977. Nothing ever seems to happen there, so the arrival of a group of brightly clad outsiders is cause for bewildered celebration. The newcomers hail not just from another town, it turns out, but from outer space, and one of them, Zan (Elle Fanning), is befriended by Enn. Some of the alien designs are indebted to "A Clockwork Orange," but Mitchell's movie is tame and toothless by comparison, with only mild hints of the orgiastic; it's hard to distinguish between what is and isn't meant to be funny. Still, Sharp makes an endearing hero, ably assisted by Ruth Wilson and a surprisingly punkish Nicole Kidman.—*A.L. (6/4 & 11/18) (In limited release and streaming.)*

### Not a Pretty Picture

In her courageous and ingenious first feature, from 1975, the director Martha Coolidge dramatizes events from her own life that took place

in 1962, when she was a sixteen-year-old prep-school student. She was raped by a friend at a party in New York, and the movie reconstructs the actions of that night as well as incidents leading up to and following the attack. It includes Coolidge's onscreen discussions with Michele Manenti, who plays the character of Martha, and Jim Carrington, who plays the rapist. Manenti (as a title card states and as she herself says) was also a victim of rape; in working to reenact Coolidge's experiences by way of agonizing psychodrama, she reexamines her own. In the documentary framework, both women confront mores of the time that shamed and blamed victims. Scenes set at school and in the city evoke Hollywood melodramas, horror films, and comedies, as if correcting commercial distortions of women's perspectives.—*Richard Brody (Anthology Film Archives, June 16, and streaming.)*

## Ocean's 8

With a cast of luminaries converging gleefully in this comedic crime reboot, there's delight in the offhand moments that lead to the central heist—of a heavily guarded necklace, from the neck of an actress (Anne Hathaway), during the Met Gala. Sandra Bullock stars as Debbie Ocean, the late Danny's sister, who, upon her release from prison for a previous scam, quickly gets back into action, reuniting with her former partners in crime (Cate Blanchett and Sarah Paulson) and recruiting new collaborators, including a hacker (Rihanna), a

jeweller (Mindy Kaling), a pickpocket (Awkwafina), and a fashion designer (Helena Bonham Carter). Their criminal artistry is so refined and so reliable that they seem all but superheroic, rendering the grand set piece in the Metropolitan Museum anticlimactic—yet the subsequent decrescendo regains solid footing. The director, Gary Ross (who co-wrote the script with Olivia Milch), brings some visual swing to match the actresses' riffy energy, which far surpasses the movie's dramatic interest.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

## Solo: A Star Wars Story

On the principle that no character in the distant galaxy is unworthy of exploration, Ron Howard's new film trawls through the history of Han Solo (Alden Ehrenreich). We encounter him first on the planet Corellia, where he toils in near-servitude and pledges his affections to Qi'ra (Emilia Clarke), although his anguish, when he escapes and leaves her behind, doesn't seem too overwhelming. Indeed, the whole movie has an air of unimpassioned moderation, Han's deepest ardor being reserved for the Millennium Falcon, which he wins from Lando Calrissian (Donald Glover). There's a nicely breakneck sequence aboard a speeding train, and some of the dialogue, by Lawrence Kasdan and his son Jonathan, has a dry snap that recalls the growling era of Harrison Ford, yet the story, adding little to our grasp of Solo's character, feels surplus to requirements. With Woody Harrelson,

Thandie Newton, and Joonas Suotamo, as Chewbacca.—*A.L. (6/4 & 11/18) (In wide release.)*

## Upgrade

Several clever twists can't fill the hollowness of this low-key sci-fi thriller. Logan Marshall-Green stars as Grey Trace, a customizer of classic cars in an unspecified future with self-driving vehicles. He and his wife, Asha (Melanie Vallejo), an executive at a high-tech company, are waylaid by a band of criminals; she is murdered and he is wounded, leaving him a quadriplegic. A reclusive tech mogul (Harrison Gilbertson) offers Grey an experimental chip-like implant that will restore his mobility. Grey finds that the implant, which is endowed with extraordinary computing power, speaks to him and responds to his commands, and he recruits it to help find his wife's killers—but it also turns Grey into an unwilling killing machine. The contrivances and clichés multiply as the action gets gorier, without ever illuminating Grey's alienating experience; the movie hammers home a simplistically technophobic message even as it sets up a sequel. Written and directed by Leigh Whannell.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

## READINGS AND TALKS

### Mark Kelly and Samantha Bee 92nd Street Y

Kelly, a retired astronaut and U.S. Navy captain, is the husband of Gabrielle Giffords, the former U.S. representative who was shot during a campaign stop in Arizona in 2011. Kelly sits down with Bee, the comedian and host of TBS's "Full Frontal," for a discussion of the current political climate and the reanimated gun-control debate that has followed the recent spate of school shootings. Giffords will offer opening remarks.—*K. Leander Williams (June 14 at 8.)*

### Edwidge Danticat Brooklyn Public Library

Individuals moving between worlds inhabit many stories by the Haitian-American writer Danticat. Immigration concerns will likely be at the forefront when she gives this season's "Message from the Library," a biannual address in which noted figures reflect on issues important to local communities.—*K.L.W. (June 17 at 7.)*

### Rachel Cusk Greenlight Bookstore

In "Outline" and "Transit," the first two parts of Cusk's acclaimed trilogy, the U.K.-based novelist and sometime memoirist constructs fragmented texts from the oral histories gathered up by Faye, the writer at the center of the narrative. In this magazine, Judith Thurman wrote that Faye's findings are "exquisitely attuned to the ways in which humans victimize one another." The *New Yorker* staff writer Alexandra Schwartz joins Cusk to discuss "Kudos," the final book in the trilogy, which was released in May.—*K.L.W. (June 18 at 7:30.)*

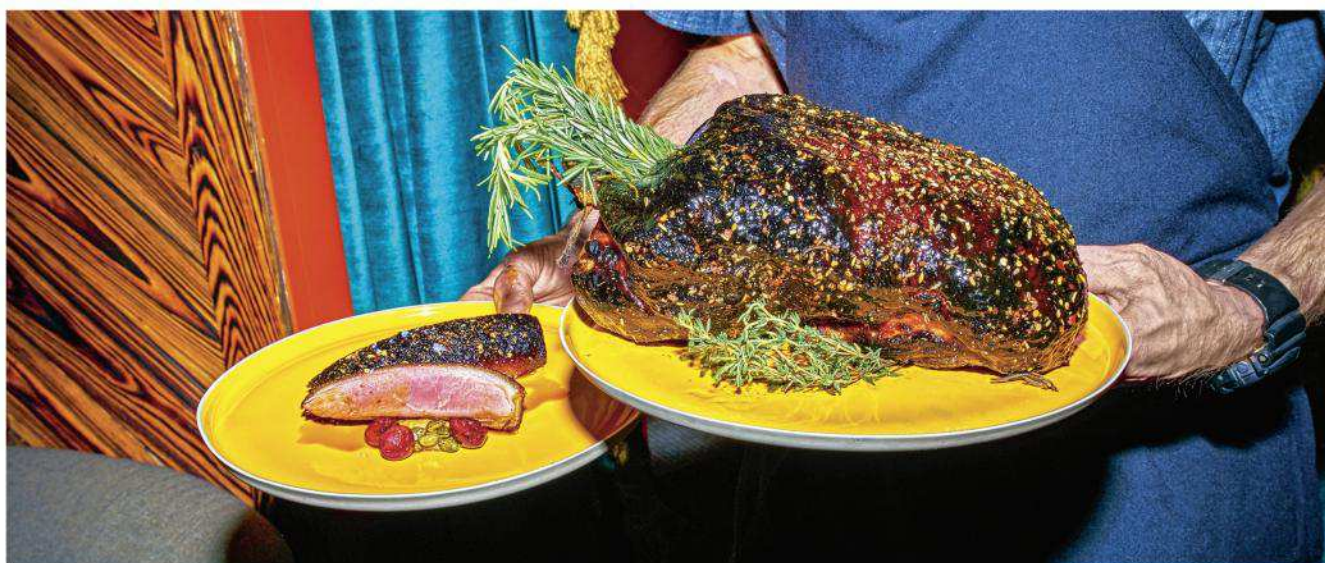
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## IN REVIVAL



The retrospective of Luchino Visconti's features at Film Society of Lincoln Center includes a new print of "**Ludwig**," his grand and melancholy 1973 bio-pic about the King of Bavaria (Helmut Berger), whose reckless pursuit of aesthetic and sensual pleasure cost him his throne. (Ludwig's patronage of Richard Wagner—played by Trevor Howard—provides conflict and music; his construction of palaces provides splendid sets.) Romy Schneider co-stars, as Ludwig's confidante Princess Elisabeth of Austria. The film was severely shortened for its release and wasn't restored to Visconti's nearly four-hour cut until 1980, after his death. It screens June 16 and June 22-28.—*Richard Brody*





## TABLES FOR TWO

### Legacy Records

#### Hell's Kitchen

The other day, while walking to the far west side of midtown Manhattan, I found myself humming Bruce Springsteen's "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out." No one, not even Springsteen himself, has ever been able to say what a "Tenth Avenue freeze-out" is, exactly, but it felt like a fitting anthem for venturing past Ninth, where the bars and bodegas have long seemed like the last signs of civilization before uncharted tumbleweed territory. Great change is afoot, however, as the Hudson Yards redevelopment project forges ahead. Ambitious skyscrapers have been built, if not yet filled, and more are under construction. Banks and management consulting firms are moving in.

On the ground floor and mezzanine of Henry Hall, an upmarket apartment building between Tenth and Eleventh where a recording studio once stood, there's even a restaurant: Legacy Records, the latest from the hospitality group behind the hot spots Charlie Bird and Pasquale Jones, in SoHo and Nolita, respectively. Though its affiliations have made it a genuinely buzzy destination, anyone expecting the same cool factor may be disappointed: both the building and the dining room have the sprawling, swanky, but slightly sterile vibe of a luxury hotel in a blander city.

The food, which is vaguely Italian, reads like a careful primer on current trends, well executed if obligatory. There

are craft cocktails, listed on a card tucked twice into a pocket inside the menu, as though it's a library book; tiny portions of crudo; and a seven-dollar bread plate with rosemary lardo. I hoped the San Daniele prosciutto topped with fresh shaved horseradish would taste like being let in on a secret ("Bet you'd never guess these two things go so well together!"), but it was more akin to a game of Telephone. An appealingly enormous, rectangular raviolo, with a line of meaty morels, peas, and chervil down its middle, brought to mind a high-rise, as on theme as a Mickey Mouse pancake at Disneyland.

Among the entrées—heritage chicken, grilled branzino, spring lamb—the only surprise was the duck for two. The whole dry-aged bird—its honey-lacquered skin nearly blackened and coated in fennel seeds and chili flakes, glittering like a Judith Leiber clutch—was presented tableside, then whisked away to be carved and plated. The breast was served in striking wedges, each with strata of crispy skin, luscious fat, and tender meat, as rich and gamy as foie gras. But where were the legs? Because their flavor is "super funky," a waiter explained, they're not usually served; we were welcome to try them if we liked. We did. Significantly humbler, they fell apart into messy shreds, but were no less delicious. In a huge, cushy booth nearby, three heavily coiffed women posed for a series of selfies. At another table, an investment banker ordered the duck for two, for one. (517 W. 38th St. Entrées \$35–\$80.)

—Hannah Goldfield



## BAR TAB

### Vol de Nuit

#### West Village

At the start of summer in New York, the spendthrift Europhile, unable to afford a transatlantic voyage, can reach, on foot, several airy patios with echoes of Provence. One, dripping in verdure, is that of the cocktail and oyster lounge Maison Premiere, in Williamsburg. Another is this Belgian beer bar off Washington Square Park, where thirsty travellers cradle goblets of Chimay and Delirium Tremens drawn straight from the tap. Its name, borrowed from a novel by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry set at the dawn of commercial aviation, translates to Night Flight, suggesting, along with the Trappist ales on offer, a red-eye into a land of pastoral retreat and deep history. A few weeks ago, two men seeking a Continental illusion hopped around the bar like backpackers on a lightning tour. They spent two minutes at the counter ordering, two minutes on wooden stools by the windows waiting for their beers to be pulled, and the rest of the afternoon at an outside table surrounded by white walls of brick and plaster that evoked a village in le Midi. "Ohn hon hon," one intoned, in imitation of a French guffaw, as he took a sip of his Duvel Green, which had a tall head and which he described approvingly as a "baker's picnic." A waiter brought French fries—hot, salty, and greasy, like a sunbathing German trying to stir up his melanin on the Riviera. A third man joined them, ordered a Palm Belgian amber (dry, effervescent, shades of sienna), and pointed to a different Teutonic signifier on his friend's upper lip—"You've got a little bit of a Hitler 'stache." The friend licked away the square of foam. They all agreed that the day's simulation was a success. "There's an Antifa bar in Berlin I really like," one said, admiring the courtyard. "It has a similar setup." (148 W. 4th St. 212-982-3388.)

—Neima Jahromi





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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT

#### KIM'S CHINESE LESSONS

In the city of Pyongyang, the sanctum sanctorum of the Workers' Party of Korea, there are changes afoot that would have vexed Stalin. Repression has not dimmed, but, to indulge the aspirations of the young North Korean elite, a class known to foreigners as "Pyonghattan," the government has permitted the odd yoga class, squash court, and sushi bar. In Chinese-made taxis, which have proliferated since 2013, the meter starts at a dollar, an exorbitant sum for the average worker in the countryside, but unremarkable for residents of the capital. The drivers pay a fee to the state and keep the profits, in one of many quasi-capitalist accommodations that the government has adopted in recent years to defuse demands for a more modern life.

North Korea is on the cusp of the largest step yet in its budding, fitful engagement with the outside world. Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump's bid for history, the nuclear summit, is expected to take place on June 12th, at Singapore's five-star Capella Hotel, on a tiny island overlooking the Singapore Strait. Once home to pirates who ambushed passing ships, the island was known, in Malay, as Pulau Belakang Mati, or the Island Where Death Lurks Behind. In 1972, it was designated a tourism site and, fortunately for the summit, renamed Sentosa, which means peace and tranquillity. The story of how the two nations reached this point, just months after threatening each other with nuclear war, is often framed as a cascade of sudden events, which started on New

Year's Day, when, in a speech, Kim expressed a desire to "alleviate the tensions." South Korea's President, Moon Jae-in, seized on the overture, first at the Olympic Games and then in April, when he walked hand in hand with Kim across the fortified border between their countries. By May, the United States and North Korea were preparing, haltingly, for a summit that Trump described as a "get-to-know-you situation."

But Kim's push to end his country's isolation didn't begin on New Year's Day. As the reforms in Pyongyang make vivid, Kim is under growing pressure to raise the living standards of the population. In his attempt to unleash the economy and hold on to his dictatorship, he seems to be taking a lesson from China's Communist Party: change, or die.

Until recently, North Korea largely avoided Chinese lessons. The Kim dynasty, which has ruled the nation since

its founding, in 1948, solidified its power by insulating the country from foreign ideas and exposure. The Kims maintained control by promoting the illusion that, even in poverty, North Korea was a "socialist paradise." As North Korea crawled out of famine, China's leaders suggested a solution from their history. In the late nineteen-seventies, the political mayhem of the Communist Party had left China with a per-capita income a third that of sub-Saharan Africa. When Deng Xiaoping came to power, in 1978, he shifted China's focus from "class struggle" to "economic development," sparking an economic rebirth under a system that became known as "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

Kim Jong Il, the father of Kim Jong Un, was unconvinced. He experimented halfheartedly with "special economic zones" before settling on a "military-first" policy, which prioritized defense spending. Kim Jong Il died in 2011, and his heir faced a perilous fact: the national myth was failing. Foreign TV shows and movies, smuggled in from China on DVDs, flash drives, and cell phones, were spreading fast, allowing North Koreans to see just how far they had fallen off the pace of the world. Kim promised that the people would "never have to tighten their belts again," and set about giving them more economic control. In 2013, he stepped beyond the "military first" mantra to proclaim a policy of "dual progress," which gave equal weight to the development of nuclear weapons and to the economy. The government encouraged students and businessmen to visit China and "learn from the Chinese."

North Korea will never simply import



China's system, and Pyongyang is wary of Beijing's influence. But, in recent years, as President Xi Jinping has intensified political control, the Chinese model has become easier for Pyongyang to adapt. "Xi Jinping has narrowed the gap between the configuration of their system and what Kim wants: No more collective leadership. No more term limits. No particular stigma attached to sending your comrade-in-arms to jail," Daniel Russel, the vice-president of the Asia Society Policy Institute, said recently. By 2017, nearly half of North Koreans were involved in some form of private enterprise—driving, selling noodles, renting out spare bedrooms. South Korea's intelligence service estimates that the North's private sector is comparable in size to those of Hungary and Poland shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union. This spring, in a moment reminiscent of China's 1978 declarations, Kim an-

nounced his decision to direct "all efforts" toward "economic construction." John Delury, of Yonsei University, in Seoul, said, "It's impossible not to hear echoes of Deng." He added, "Kim is breaking North Korea out of some of its ruts."

How far that spirit will extend at the summit is difficult to predict. A conceivable outcome would be a joint statement that establishes the ultimate goal of removing nuclear weapons from North Korea, in return for assurances against an American attack and steps toward a peace treaty that would, at last, end the Korean War. Kim's goal is, of course, to insure the survival of his state. Having developed the security of a nuclear weapon, he has turned to the economy, but it can thrive only if he achieves relief from sanctions and gains access to the kind of foreign capital that aided China's awakening. In effect, Kim and Trump will be negotiating a swap: some level of

weaponry for some level of growth, and each will be trying to set the price.

The outcome will rest largely on Kim's conception of his own path to political survival. At thirty-four, he stands to rule his country for decades, and the ever-rising expectations of his people will pose a greater threat to him over time. "His current situation of total state control is not sustainable," Abigail Grace, who was, until last month, an Asia adviser at the National Security Council, said. "It's entirely possible that Kim Jong Un has recognized that, on a five-to-ten-year time horizon, trouble could arise." As in China, forty years ago, North Korea's leadership knows that it cannot stand still. Kim may well follow China's course of moving carefully but persistently, in order to, as the Party elder Chen Yun put it at the time, "cross the river by feeling for the stones."

—Evan Osnos

## DEPT. OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS RELATIONS



A few hours before game three of the N.B.A. finals, last week, when the Golden State Warriors took a three-to-zero series lead over the Cleveland Cavaliers, Ann Kerr gave the final talk of the semester for a U.C.L.A. seminar called *Perceptions of the U.S. Abroad: Discussions with Fulbright Scholars*. Kerr is the director of Southern California's Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program, the author of "Come with Me from Lebanon: An American Family Odyssey," and the mother of, as she likes to say, "two Ph.D.s, an M.B.A., and an N.B.A.," the latter being the Golden State Warriors head coach, Steve Kerr. Ann studied in Lebanon in the fifties, and later married Malcolm Kerr—a Middle East scholar at U.C.L.A. and the president of an American university in Lebanon—who was assassinated in 1984, outside his office in Beirut, by members of what became Hezbollah. Last fall, after "long family discussions" about how to use a financial settlement, the Kerrs created a scholarship for a stu-

dent from "the greater Middle East" to pursue a Ph.D. in liberal arts at U.C.L.A. Their first student, from Lebanon, will arrive this fall. "Some people still want to come to our country, thankfully," Kerr told a visitor.

A slight octogenarian with bright eyes and a gray bob, Kerr conceived of her *Perceptions* seminar after 9/11. Her students converse with Fulbright scholars stationed around the world, and, these days, "try not to talk about Trump—because everyone is kind of on the same page about him: he's a clown who shouldn't be President of this great country."

For their final class, Kerr's students read a chapter from her book and the prologue to "One Family's Response to Terrorism: A Daughter's Memoir," written by her daughter, Susan Kerr van de Ven, which begins, "Back in the good old days, when terrorism was still at a nuisance level, my father used to supplement the family income by writing disaster scenarios for Middle East watchers in the U.S. government." A few copies sit in Kerr's office, whose walls are covered with art and photos of her kids. She told stories about each child, eventually pointing to a newspaper clipping showing Steve, then playing for the Spurs, guarded by Michael Jordan. She recalled her son's time with the Bulls. "Steve got a little cross when Michael came back

after baseball. They were scrimmaging and rubbed elbows a bit, you could say."

Kerr began the seminar with reflections on her first year in Lebanon. She sat under a map of the Middle East. "I got this bee in my bonnet to study abroad," she said. "I boarded a Dutch freighter: seventeen-day voyage to Beirut from New York. The only place we stopped was Casablanca. I heard Arabic for the first time. I heard the call to prayer. So magical. I got pulled in, and I still feel the same way." She passed around a photo of her roommates, "two Palestinians, one Lebanese, one Iraqi, and Ann Zwicker, from Santa Monica."

Describing the period after her hus-



Ann Kerr and Steve Kerr



band's murder, Kerr said, "In the Middle East, the tradition of grieving is similar to the Jewish tradition. Everybody sits around and visits. You don't say much. Pass the coffee. And then have a period of commemoration." She went on, "We didn't do all that. But we stayed in the Middle East. I just felt very comfortable there." Kerr moved to Egypt, reprising a teaching job at the American University in Cairo. At the time, Steve was playing basketball at the University of Arizona. "So a couple nights after the assassination, his whole team wore black arm-bands. Tucson kind of adopted him as their son."

Daanish Izhar, a global-studies major from Pakistan, raised his hand. "I'm sorry," he said. "You mean Steve Kerr?" The class laughed. "Oh, my God."

Ann said, "Sounds like you're a fan?" "A huge fan," Izhar said.

Ann talked about her son. "It's nice that he uses his role to speak out on social issues. He most recently spoke out on the N.F.L. players kneeling. Kneeling is a sign of respect." She added, "It's silly Trump won't bring the Eagles to the White House." (Last Tuesday, Golden State's Stephen Curry and Cleveland's LeBron James said that their teams would decline a potential post-championship visit. Three days later, Trump disinvited both teams.)

Izhar agreed. After a few students discussed their national identities, he raised his hand again. "I was raised in a small town in Pakistan," he said. "I started learning English in middle school, and because I was good at sports I got to go to a big boarding school." He went on, "No matter where you are in Pakistan, you ask someone for a cigarette and they give it to you. In America, if I ask ten people maybe one will offer." He'd quit smoking. "Still," he said, "I hope I can stay here."

Later that evening, at Kerr's hilltop home in L.A., she prepared pasta and watched the N.B.A. finals with a few guests. She kept an eye on Klay Thompson, her favorite player, "because he's understated." She also offered advice. "I'm no basketball aficionado," she said, "But Draymond shouldn't be taking those three-pointers." After the Warriors won, she went to her closet to look for an N.B.A. championship ring given to her when Steve was on the Bulls. She couldn't find it. Shrugging, she said, "It's

probably under some clothes somewhere. There are more important things."

—Charles Bethea

## TAKING STOCK FIFTY SONGS



"I'm used to sitting where I can fiddle with the climate controls," Stephen Merritt, the fifty-three-year-old songwriter and composer, said the other day from the back seat of a Subaru Forester belonging to Claudia Gonson, his Magnetic Fields bandmate and longtime manager. She was chauffeuring Merritt, who had taught her to drive almost thirty-five years ago, and who is best known for the 1999 album "69 Love Songs." They were headed to a theatrical-prop house in Rahway, New Jersey, to unpack materials for a staged production of "50 Song Memoir," Merritt's most recent work, coming to the Apollo Theatre, in Harlem, on June 15th.

Merritt blew on his tea. They have had the same caffeine routine since the mid-nineties: Merritt, who generally sleeps till the late morning, will have green tea to wake up, while Gonson, who is a morning person, drinks chamomile to calm down. "Until we meet in the middle," Gonson said.

"Could there be a little bit of air?" Merritt asked. He always wears clothes in brown hues, to simplify wardrobe choices. "The word I use is 'parameters,'" Gonson said.

"Can you turn the music up or off?" he asked. "I have a problem with music I can only barely hear. It makes it impossible for me to follow a conversation."

The notion to do a fifty-song memoir to commemorate his fiftieth birthday—one song for each year—came from Bob Hurwitz, until last year the head of Nonesuch Records, Merritt's label. Hurwitz also had the idea of staging the musical memoir, and introduced Merritt to Joseph V. Melillo, the executive producer of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. They decided to re-create onstage a version of the upstate town house where the composer spends half his time and does most of his work, and where every room is

packed with tchotchkes and bric-a-brac and strange instruments that Merritt has found at antique shops and flea markets. Merritt's partner, José Zayas, a theatre director, had the idea for overhead projections that tie the fifty songs together with the selection of a hundred or so of his collectibles onstage.

Theatre is a departure for the Magnetic Fields, an ensemble with roots in Harvard, where Gonson and two other original members were students in the late eighties; Merritt was at the Harvard Extension School. "We had two or three simple rules" for staging the memoir, Gonson noted, as she sped through the Holland Tunnel. "Please don't make Stephen have an epileptic fit," with strobe lights, was one. "Don't use smoke so that he has an asthma attack" was another. And don't aggravate the artist's hyperacusis, a hearing disorder in which ordinary sounds can be painful, and the reason that Merritt switched from guitar to ukulele and Gonson from drums to piano. Onstage, his three-sided town-house model will serve to sonically insulate Merritt from the other musicians.

At the prop house, propNspoon, the pair were met by their production manager. Merritt slowly uncrated the show's objects. There was a coatrack made from an oar, a fish-shaped watering can, a Nativity scene (Joseph and Mary are headless), and a toy dog named Dave. There was a lidless percussion box with a kid's xylophone and noisemakers and shakers that Merritt and Gonson had bought at the Toys R Us in Framingham, Massachusetts, in the late eighties, and used in their early recordings.

Merritt's childhood was peripatetic. "When I was twenty-two, my mother and I sat down and figured out that we had lived in thirty-three places," he said. His mother was a Buddhist seeker who sometimes lived on communes. "She was known to go off to Hawaii and other exotic places for Buddhist stuff," he said. He grew up not knowing his father, a folk-rock singer named Scott Fagan. One night, when he was in his early twenties, Merritt found his father's album in a record store in Boston and got so excited that he locked his keys in the car with the engine running and had to call Gonson to come get him. He was staring at the cover when she arrived. "The face of

his father, which looked exactly like Stephen's face, was huge on the record," she recalled. However, his dad's voice was closer to David Bowie's—nothing like his son's velvety baritone.

"I have repressed this memory," Merritt said.

After Merritt became famous, his father invited him to a screening of a documentary about his former manager, Doc Pomus, at Lincoln Center. They went out for Chinese food afterward.

Finally, out of the crate, Merritt lifted Hootie, a somewhat battered but resilient stuffed owl from the early sixties, also clad in earth tones. He seemed particularly fond of it. The bird was reminiscent of Glumpet, an owl his great-grandmother had crocheted for him when he was a child.

Gingerly holding Hootie, Merritt said, "He will need work after the show in Toronto," where the production will conclude at the end of June. "Touring is hard on an owl, especially one from 1962."

—John Seabrook

## THE PICTURES FULLY REALIZED



On a recent briny Tuesday afternoon near the Red Hook waterfront, Nick Offerman, the actor, woodworker, author, comedian, and enthusiastic husband of Megan Mullally, sat in a curved red banquette at Sunny's, a local bar once

frequented by longshoremen and dockworkers. He wore a mint-green linen shirt and his graying beard was full but tidy—a style that the diagram of facial-hair configurations in his book "Paddle Your Own Canoe: One Man's Fundamentals for Delicious Living" might categorize as the Tracker. He drank a rye whiskey, neat. Near him, amid ancient nautical doodads and figurines of the Marx Brothers, was a framed photograph of cast and crew from the movie "Hearts Beat Loud," out last week, in which Offerman stars. He plays a struggling record-store owner (beard style: Mr. Natural) who forms a band with his teen-age daughter (Kiersey Clemons) the summer before she leaves for college. Sunny's plays itself. Ted Danson, back behind the bar, plays its proprietor.

The writers of "Hearts Beat Loud," Marc Basch and Brett Haley, whose film "The Hero" Offerman appeared in last year, wrote the part for him. "They sent me the script and I said, 'This is uncanny, you guys,'" Offerman said. "I built my first canoe in a shop on the pier over here," he said, gesturing west. (He has since built many canoes.) "The shop had the Statue of Liberty out the window. And Baked, the coffee shop where I hear the song"—his character hears his band's song playing in a café, and freaks out with head-bobbing zeal—"and Sunny's were my spots."

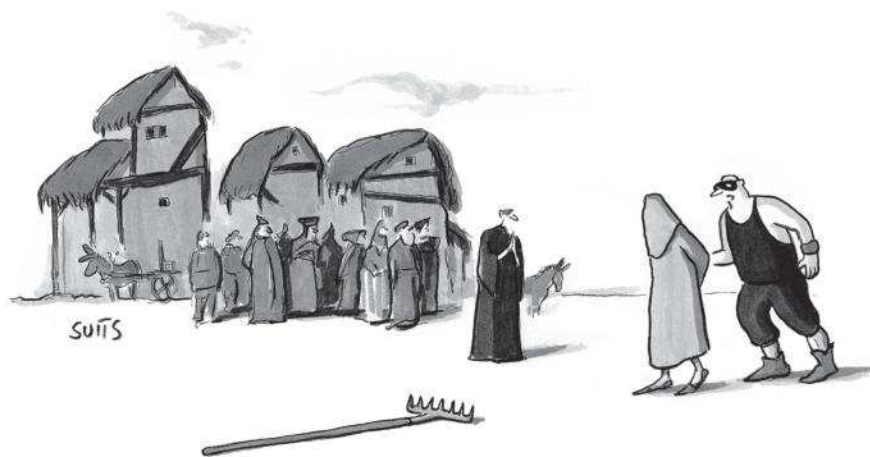
Offerman and Mullally live in Los Angeles. His Red Hook days were in 2007, when Mullally was co-starring in "Young Frankenstein" on Broadway. "Sometimes when your wife says, 'Hey, can we move to New York so I can do

this Mel Brooks musical?,' you take a deep breath and say, 'Yes, we can, honey,' and you pack a bag of chisels and hand planes," he said. He saw "Young Frankenstein" twenty-five times. "I am a very big fan of Megan's work in musical comedy," he said. "She can rip it, and then she can *snap* it, and then she wraps it up with a bow, and shoves it straight up your keister." He giggled. During the day, he'd ride his bike from Manhattan to Red Hook and work on the canoe. Once or twice a week, he and a friend would go to Sunny's for a beer, or to hear some bluegrass. "So Red Hook could not have been a more romantic setting, coming in," he said.

"Hearts Beat Loud" is Offerman's first starring role. An Illinois native and a veteran of the Chicago theatre scene—he appeared in David Cromer's production of "Adding Machine"—he is perhaps best known for playing the ornery, mustachioed breakfast enthusiast Ron Swanson, on "Parks and Recreation," a character who inspired intense fandom. (And tattoos.) He's grateful for that, he said. "And at the same time I'm probably equally grateful that the world is still allowing me to get acting jobs," some not entirely Swansonesque. On " Fargo," he plays a breakfast enthusiast (with "a C. Everett Koop beard, which is just hilarious") who also has serious dramatic moments. On "Curb Your Enthusiasm"—in which Danson plays himself—Offerman has played Cody, "the stage manager of Lin-Manuel Miranda's fatwa musical, in which F. Murray Abraham plays the ayatollah."

Offerman, like Mullally, is a proud self-described character actor. In college, he said, he realized that, instead of pursuing the path of Tom Cruise, "it was a lot more fun to play his villains, or the guy inventing his James Bond-technology car, or his meth dealer." One of the pleasures of Cromer's "Adding Machine," he said, was that veteran character actors got to star. "It was like the characters of Jerry and Retta, on 'Parks and Rec'—these character performers who had never gotten to have a solo. And suddenly it's their show, and they're *destroying* the audience."

In "Hearts Beat Loud," Offerman's character is a rumpled, Wilco-loving widower who smokes in his record shop and makes earnest pronouncements about



"O.K., now walk forward casually."





Nick Offerman

music. Offerman was moved when he read the script. “For the first time, I was going to play a fully realized normal guy,” he said. “I didn’t have to swing an axe. I didn’t have to wrestle a bear.” He said that after shooting scenes with Clemmons, or with Toni Collette, who plays his landlord and love interest, “I would say, ‘You guys, I’ve never gotten to do this! I’m just a vulnerable guy trying to get this woman to kiss me, or trying to get my daughter to think I’m cool.’ I was giddy like a freshman at prom.”

Tone Balzano Johansen, the widow of the bar’s founder, Sunny Balzano, came by to say hello.

“Back at the scene of the crime,” Offerman said.

“I’m so honored,” Johansen said, smiling. She opened a door, revealing an alley, an old wagon wheel, and a pinkening sky. Harbor breezes wafted in.

“You’re a generous proprietor,” Offerman said.

—Sarah Larson

## DEPT. OF HOOPLA CRAYONS UP



Maybe it’s not a coincidence that, at a time when so many public figures seem to be having trouble staying within the lines, coloring books have made a comeback. They are entering a baroque phase. The other day, thirty-odd

Manhattan children attended a tea party in the penthouse suite at the Mark Hotel, on East Seventy-seventh Street, to road test the hotel’s new coloring book, “The Colorful Mark.” It was created by the fashion illustrator Jean-Philippe Delhomme, and includes elaborate line drawings of what a marketing employee for the hotel called “all the normal Mark activities”—a blowout at Frédéric Fekkai, a pedicab ride to Bergdorf’s to find a dress for the Met Gala.

“I like coloring when I’m bored, and I like it more than math at school,” Gray Neville, age eight, said, sitting at a table on the terrace. She was at the party with her mother, the makeup artist Gucci Westman. “And from my old apartment I used to draw the view sometimes.”

The party was officially hosted by several teen-age girls who are used to seeing their parents’ names in the society columns. “My mom texted me and told me I was doing this,” Colette Rohatyn, a Spence freshman and the daughter of the gallery owner Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, said. “I like to stay home, so she probably thought anything that got me out of the house would be a win-win.”

“I still color in my room to relax,” Charlotte Callender, a freshman at Trinity and the daughter of the producer Colin Callender, said.

“I used to love coloring at Serafina,” Rohatyn went on, referring to an Upper East Side restaurant. “They used to have a box of crayons just for me. But when I went back a couple of years ago, when I was thirteen, they must have thought I was too old, so I had to ask for them.” At fifteen, she associates coloring with a simpler time. “It was before we had phones, so when you ran out of things to talk about at dinner you could play tic-tac-toe or color.”

Painting and coloring books emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Educators believed that, in addition to exposing people to art, the books helped enhance cognitive abilities and improve technical skills. The popularization of the crayon, in the nineteen-thirties, brought the pastime to a wider audience. About five years ago, adult coloring books, marketed as “mindfulness” tools, became hugely popular; in 2016, fourteen million of them were sold.

In the Mark penthouse, whose square

footage is eleven thousand feet, with a rack rate of seventy-five thousand dollars a night, an industrious six-year-old was seated inside a canvas tepee. “I colored the hat brown, which is my third-favorite color,” he said, brandishing a drawing of a figure in sunglasses talking on a cell phone. “He’s calling his boss to tell him he’s in the hotel,” he added. Nearby, a little girl with pink-and-purple hair ran up and down the stairs, as Fekkai himself watched with admiration.

“She has her own Instagram account,” her mother said.

A third-grade girl in a plaid Spence uniform who didn’t feel like coloring (“I have a hundred million coloring books at home”) approached a member of the hotel’s staff. “If Justin Bieber, Maroon Five, or Selena Gomez stays here, please call me,” she said.

Around 7 P.M., Wendi Deng, who used to be married to Rupert Murdoch, led her two daughters, hosts of the party, who wore giant backpacks over sundresses, toward the exit. A little boy in a golf shirt flailed when his mother said it was time to go. “You said there’d be goody bags!” he wailed.

“Well, there aren’t,” she told him. “But there should have been.”

On the roof, a few guests lingered as the lights from the nearby Carlyle Hotel started glowing in the dusk. Renee Rockefeller, an art consultant, leaned forward to look at the work of Luna Thurman-Busson, five, whose fingernails were painted in multiple hues. Luna lives in the hotel, Eloise style, with her father, the financier Arpad Busson, when she’s not with her mother, Uma Thurman.

“I really like that you gave the dog two different-colored ears,” Rockefeller said.

“I’m moving,” the girl said, picking up her coloring book and walking away.

Apple Rockefeller and Caroline Callender, juniors at Brearley, and the oldest of the party’s hosts, were anxious to get started on their homework.

“Junior year is the worst,” Rockefeller said. “But if you just do things one step at a time and don’t think too much, you can get through it and not stress out.”

“Maybe that’s why we still need coloring books,” Callender said.

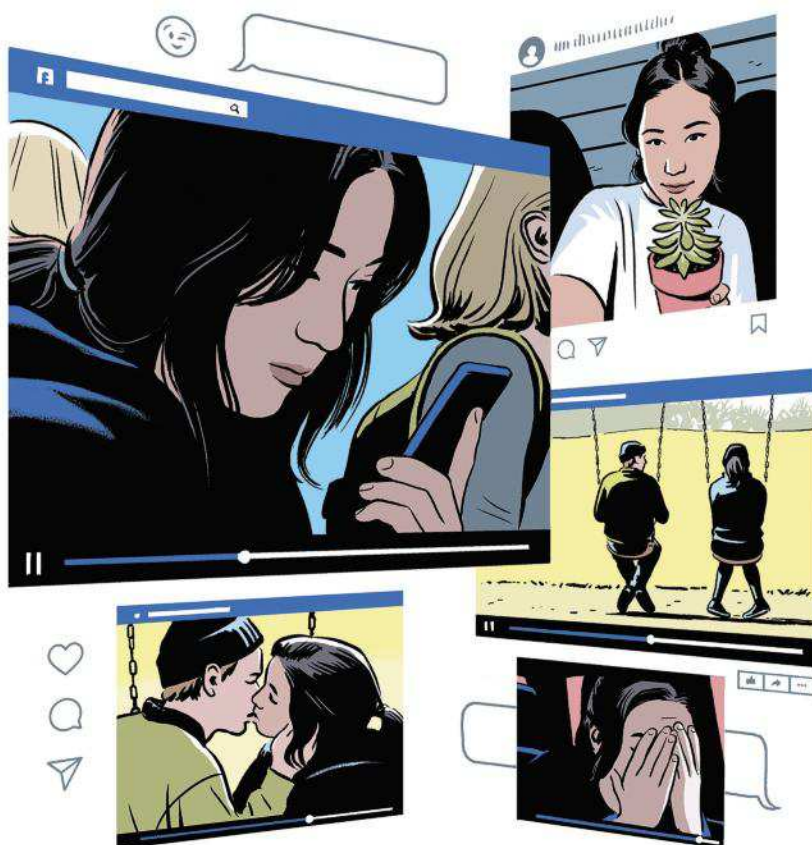
—Bob Morris

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

## POSTS MODERN

*An innovative teen drama advances, minute by minute, on your social-media feed.*

BY D. T. MAX



The first installment of the teen drama “SKAM Austin” popped up on Facebook almost without warning, on April 24th, at 3:40 P.M. Central Standard Time. No advertising preceded it. No interviews with the actors or the director accompanied its debut, and the clip had no production credits. It was as if the footage were just another update in your Facebook feed. The show—an American version of the Norwegian phenomenon “SKAM,” whose title means “shame”—did not take the form of conventional episodes. Viewers were instead offered an array of scenes, of varying lengths, shot in and around a high school in Texas’s capital. One clip was two minutes long; another was eight. These fragments began sporadically

“dropping” on Facebook Watch, the social network’s entertainment portal, in accordance with the action of the show. If a couple got into a fight in school at 12:40 P.M. on a Monday, the clip showed up on the platform at exactly that time, creating the uncanny impression that you were watching something that was actually happening. If the producers posted a clip showing a student getting dressed for a party on a Saturday night, many young viewers would be doing the same thing.

The substance of the show wasn’t that different from “Riverdale”: it offered the usual roundelay of broken hearts, bruised feelings, and hookups. Teens kissed. They zoned out in class. They shared earbuds. But “SKAM Austin” had

many hidden layers, and the producers wanted viewers to uncover them all. The characters, some of them played by local teen-agers, all had Instagram accounts, and, like real people’s, the posts offered insights into the characters’ pasts and their hopes for the future. Collectively, the video clips, photographs, and comments imbued the characters with a depth that not even flashbacks provide in conventional TV.

Soon after the first, six-minute clip of “SKAM” appeared on Facebook Watch, I developed a theory about several of the characters: long before April 24th, it seemed, Megan, a member of the school’s dance troupe, had stolen a boy named Marlon from her friend Abby, another dancer; Abby, in revenge, had shut Megan out of her life, and as a result Megan had quit the troupe. The only hint that the clip itself had offered about the girls’ relationship was a moment of Megan’s gaze lingering on Abby as she swept by with the other dancers. To decode the implications of this split-second image, I needed to do what we often do these days after meeting interesting strangers at a party: I scoured the characters’ social-media accounts. “SKAM” is a kind of detective show, rewarding the viewer who is a skilled online stalker.

Scrutiny of Abby’s Instagram posts suggested that she had scrubbed her account of traces of her friendship with Megan. But, as often happens with actual teen-agers, she had been inept in rewriting her history, forgetting to delete a video. It showed the two girls happily taking on the “mannequin challenge”—recording themselves suddenly freezing up and holding a tricky pose. Culturally attuned viewers would recall that such videos became a viral sensation at the end of 2016. This meant that the rupture had occurred sometime after that date.

As with all Internet products, once you establish a connection to “SKAM” it’s very hard to sever it. Facebook and Instagram send viewers constant reminders to log back in and stay up to date: “abby\_taffy just posted a photo”; “SKAM Austin posted a new episode on Facebook Watch.” (These messages appeared on my phone’s lock screen next to announcements of my daughter’s Instagram posts about our family’s

*“SKAM” is a kind of detective show, encouraging viewers to be skilled online stalkers.*



puppy.) The notices help viewers keep abreast of the basic story, but to get maximum pleasure from “SKAM” you must constantly burrow into the latest Instagram Stories or screenshots of texts. Internet viewing is always as much about what everyone else is watching and thinking as about what you’re watching and thinking—scholars talk about the medium’s “emotional contagion.” And “SKAM” is addictive in precisely the same way that social media can be addictive. If you miss out on too many details, you’ll feel as if you’d been demoted to sitting alone in the school cafeteria.

The fictional social media of “SKAM Austin” soon generated real social media—fervid discussion on everything from Tumblr to Twitter. For an obsessed viewer, there’s no limit to the amount of time that can be spent on “SKAM Austin” fan pages. The Internet, by leaving you feeling uniquely alone, paradoxically encourages human interaction. Megan and Marlon immediately became the cynosure of legions of online commenters, many of whom assessed the couple as if they were real. One poster wrote, “Not to get too deep and personal here, but I had an exchange with a friend who also happens to be an ex, and it made me think of Marlon and Meg, and I hadn’t realized it until today. It might be why I have such red flags about them.” She asked if anyone else felt the same way. Soon afterward, another poster wrote, “Relaaaaaaaaaaaaate.”

Conventional TV is a one-way street: you sit in front of a screen and watch an episode. Just as you must be static in order to finish watching it, the program itself is static: it had to be written, filmed, and edited to a conventional length. It represents a producer’s best guess about what will interest you (and, when there are commercials, an advertiser’s best guess about what viewers like you will buy). The model proved stable for more than fifty years, but it has crumbled in the age of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. According to a recent Nielsen report, millennials spend twenty-seven per cent less time watching TV programs (including streaming ones) than do older viewers. Every day, YouTube has an average of five billion views, more than a billion of them from mobile de-

vices. The average teen-ager spends almost nine hours a day consuming media online, and sends or receives more than a hundred text messages.

There is a clear creative opportunity in this shift away from the network model. What if all these seemingly disparate activities and digital platforms could be marshalled into a single narrative—a *Gesamtkunstwerk* for the Internet age? Would it make the old-fashioned television episode seem as antique as black-and-white TV did once color sets appeared? The time seems right for an experiment like “SKAM.” In an era of short attention spans, it can seem atavistic to watch a half-hour series, let alone binge-watch it. “Engagement” is the key metric for the online industry—advertisers want to pay for how often you like, post, and click, rather than for how long you passively watch—and “SKAM,” with its cliffhangers and its multiple entry points, is designed to inspire passionate engagement. Fidji Simo, the head of Facebook Watch, told me, “‘SKAM’ was just the perfect fit for the kind of content we wanted to do more of.” Indeed, Facebook, which has been losing young users to YouTube and Snapchat, needs such programming to attract them. And what better way to advertise Facebook than by creating a show in which all the characters use Facebook?

Two weeks into the series, a five-minute clip introduced the heartthrob of the football team. The first GIF of him appeared online before the clip finished. By the end of the day, one poster had put up twenty-two images extracted from the footage. I happened to be watching the clip drop that day with the Facebook Watch social-media staff, and even they seemed surprised by the barrage of fan activity it sparked.

Depending on your point of view, “SKAM” is either ingenious or cynical in the ways it rewards audience engagement: if you follow the Instagram accounts of the characters, they will sometimes follow you back. With “SKAM,” you’re not only an integral part of the spectacle; you’re also a producer. The show’s creators monitor fan commentary and sometimes respond to it by changing plot details on the fly. Viewers, teased by Facebook and the creators into believing that they are

being heard, and that what they’re seeing is true—or close enough—experience “SKAM” less as an alternative reality than as an extension of their own lives. By inserting a story so skillfully into our digital domains, and keeping us endlessly tethered to that story, “SKAM” may be the future of TV.

In April, a few days before the first clip was posted, I met Julie Andem, the Norwegian creator of “SKAM,” at a café in Austin, across the street from her production office. Facebook Watch had relocated her from Oslo to oversee the American production, and she was still writing and directing new scenes. A key reason that “SKAM” felt fresh to viewers, she told me, was that its clips are shot very shortly before they air. Among other things, this approach allowed Andem to take into account fan feedback and contemporary events. After the show started, a character posted that he wanted tickets for an upcoming Kendrick Lamar concert in Austin. Lamar performed in the city on May 18th, and the story that day revolved around the concert. To heighten the sense that “SKAM” is unspooling in real time, Andem adopts visual techniques that mimic the latest fads on social media. One of the characters posted a makeup tutorial that looks just like those currently popular on YouTube. The timeliness of the characters’ status updates can be unsettling. On the day of the recent school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas, two characters put up distraught Instagram posts. One of them posted a map of Texas with a heart over Santa Fe and the caption “Why tf does this keep happening?” (Audience members responded with emotion: “Because we live in a country that thinks owning a gun is far more important than the lives of innocent kids”; “We need to stand together and fight until real change happens!”)

Andem had come to the café with her social-media director, Mari Magnus, a fellow-Norwegian, who plays a crucial role in the show’s production. Andem shoots the main show; Magnus shoots the Instagram Stories—collages of video, text, and photographs—that play off Andem’s scripts. Magnus also posts comments on Instagram in

the guises of the characters. (“It is a bit creepy,” Andem has said of this ventriloquism.) Dressed in black tops and pants, the two women looked like European tourists on their way to Marfa, but they had been in Austin since October, doing very little besides working on the show.

Simon Fuller, the creator of “American Idol,” who bought the English-language rights to “SKAM” in 2016 and then partnered with Facebook Watch, told me that he had made the deal because he was impressed by Andem’s sensibility. “To be honest with you, I couldn’t see past Julie,” he told me. Andem, who until now has worked only in Norway, seems to have little interest in Hollywood fame. The executive producer of the original “SKAM” told me that Andem was unusually gifted at directing young people. When I asked Andem about this, she said, “Yes, I probably have an instinct, but I’m not aware of what I do.” She noted, “As soon as you start to comment on your own work, then some of the magic of the story goes away. Audiences want their *own* experience.” Her deflections were consistent with how “SKAM” feels: a viewer experiences the show less as the vision of a single auteur than as a vision intended for a single viewer.

I had expected Andem to tell me about her struggle to create the perfect digital entertainment—or about an insatiable corporation’s desire to commandeer eyeballs. Instead, she said that “SKAM” had begun at the Norwegian public-television network NRK, which is essentially the BBC of Norway, where she was working in the children’s division. Before making a show, producers in the division conduct in-depth interviews of their target audience. “They try to find the need, and *then* they make something to meet that need,” Andem explained. The technique had been pioneered in Silicon Valley, to help techies figure out what devices were missing from our lives.

NRK had noticed that its programming wasn’t reaching older teen girls. “It had lost them to YouTube and Netflix,” Marianne Furevold-Boland, an NRK

executive, told me. So the network asked Andem and Magnus to talk with Norwegian girls between the ages of sixteen and eighteen and find out what they longed to watch. Within eight months, Andem and Magnus had amassed several hundred interviews, and identified the need for a show that helped teens feel less overwhelmed and isolated. They thought that it would be fortifying for teen-agers to witness fictional young people navigating the treacherous waters of social life and social media—and surviving them.



The Internet component of “SKAM,” Andem said, had effectively been repurposed from shows for preteens that she had helped develop for NRK. But the audiences of those shows had been too young to participate fully in an online realm. (Officially, Facebook and Instagram are off limits to users younger than thirteen.) The older audience for “SKAM” could effortlessly integrate the show into the unfurling drama of their online lives.

Andem and her colleagues knew that teens spent time on the Internet, in part, because they could discover things there that their parents didn’t want them to see. So when “SKAM” debuted on NRK’s Web site, in September, 2015, it arrived without advertising or publicity. “We were terrified they would hear their mothers say that NRK had recently made an awesome show for young people,” Andem explained to *Rushprint*, a Norwegian film magazine. The ploy worked: teens found “SKAM” by word of mouth. By the end of Season 2, ninety-eight per cent of Norwegian teens between fifteen and nineteen knew about the show—more than knew about “Game of Thrones.”

It helped that “SKAM” was a fast-paced, sexually explicit drama about the turbulent lives of affluent sixteen-year-olds at an Oslo high school, and that it dealt with pivotal issues in teen life: coming out, sexual assault, ethnic discrimination. But the true secret of the show’s success was that it was mostly about how it *feels* to be in high school—when a social gaffe feels like the end of the world, and a first kiss feels like

the start of a new one. As Andem puts it, “Everything’s exciting and scary.” She captures this intensity with her heightened filming style: claustrophobic closeups of teens arguing on video chat; streaky, slow-motion pans of friends dancing at a party.

In Austin, Andem had been researching teen life in Texas, trying “to understand why Americans are the way they are.” (Most Norwegian teens, Magnus noted, simply go to school and go home, whereas American teens are endlessly involved in after-school activities.) As in Norway, the Austin story lines had been shaped, to some extent, by conversations with teens. In an attempt to find nonprofessional actors, “SKAM Austin” had scouted talent at local skate parks and high schools. Fourteen hundred kids showed up for an audition at the casting agent’s office, and Andem saw half of them herself. She warmed the candidates up with improv games. “Everything they improvise yields information about who they are,” she pointed out. “That’s part of the study of who American teens are.” She favors teens who volunteer their thoughts on the script. If someone tells her, “I wouldn’t say this line,” she changes it.

Andem wants the dialogue on “SKAM” to feel raw and unscripted. She films rehearsals, because a less polished take often strikes her as the best. And she is excited by the dramatic novelities of the multi-platform format. She spoke of a moment in the middle of the Norwegian show’s second season, when an ethereal young woman named Noora was waiting for a call or a text from William, a young man with whom she was having a relationship. They had had a fight, and she hadn’t heard from him since. This was fairly conventional dramatic material, but with scenes being posted in real time, Andem said, Noora’s predicament felt agonizing. In an era of instant gratification and total information, frustration turns out to be one of the most powerful sources of drama. For about a week, William kept silent—no clip dropped. Andem recalled that other employees in the NRK offices were “just sitting there, refreshing the ‘SKAM’ page” on their computer screens. She and Magnus took further advantage of the moment



after noticing, in the comments section of the show's Web site, a young woman's lament: "I can't concentrate on my exam until William has answered." Andem and Magnus transferred these words to one of Noora's friends, who typed them during a group chat with Noora. Scripted drama had morphed into real drama, and then morphed back into fictional drama.

"SKAM" ran for four seasons, and became a worldwide phenomenon. Four thousand fan fictions were written about the characters. France, Germany, and Italy produced their own versions of the show. On Weibo, the Chinese counterpart to YouTube, subtitled clips of the Norwegian "SKAM" were viewed a hundred and eighty million times.

Traditionally, the television screen has not been something that you communicate with; it's like a professor lecturing. Your smartphone is a friend who has your ear. You gossip, plan, and hang out with it. It is axiomatic that the way we tell stories changes as new technology emerges; the rise of the novel would have been impossible without cheap paper and movable type. But it's also true that a story is responsive to the environment in which it's told. Ghost stories gain energy from lambent campfire; a romantic kiss becomes more intense when it is flickering on the gigantic screen of a darkened movie theatre.

Almost since the start of the smartphone era, film and TV producers have been trying to figure out how to capitalize on our new habit of jumping from one screen to the next. At first, many of these efforts felt like tricks. In 2006, a video blog called *lonelygirl15* featured an ordinary-seeming teen-ager who posted regular updates about her life on YouTube and interacted with her fans on her MySpace page. The teen-ager was later revealed to be an actress; the events were fictional. In 2000, "Big Brother," a reality show on CBS, in which roommates conspire against one another, was supplemented with streaming footage of the contestants, but it seemed to be an afterthought, like the outtakes included on the DVD of a film.

With "SKAM," the multi-platform approach feels organic—after all, the characters themselves are constantly

shuttling among YouTube and Instagram and Facebook Messenger. A teen-age "SKAM" fan named Daniel Mo was at first mystified by the show's structural complexity, given that its story lines could have been told the old-fashioned way. Mo said, "I remember asking myself, 'Is this *really* necessary?' And the answer is yes." One day, he realized that he was giving "likes" to posts by "SKAM" characters, just as he did to posts by close friends. Because "SKAM" flowed seamlessly into his social-media accounts, his sudden awareness of a character's troubles often caught him off guard, and he was genuinely moved.

Mo responded to my question on a Wednesday at 10 P.M.—a time when teen-agers tend to be on their phones. "SKAM Austin" was thirteen days old, and twelve scenes had dropped, which amounted to about seventy-six minutes of footage. The audience had met the four girls who, along with Megan, formed the core of the ensemble, and had watched them flirt, quarrel, hug, and dis. (Sarah Heyward, a television writer who worked on "Girls," had been collaborating with Andem on the scripts.) The characters spent a lot of time with their noses nearly touching portable screens, trying to make sense of their world, which is exactly what

viewers were doing by following them. The Internet has a possessive imperative—you want to grab what you see before it disappears—and many "SKAM" posters had aligned themselves with particular characters, as if choosing sides in a football game. One chose Kelsey. A second wrote, "Megan totally represented me when hot guys walk in front of me." Another declared, "Jo's still my fave." A fourth announced, "Grace is my current mood."

Andem had told me that she enjoys watching soap operas, and I suspected that the ugly personal history between Megan and Abby would not be forgotten. I wasn't disappointed. A further interrogation of Megan's Instagram account revealed that, on New Year's Day, 2018, she had posted an image of a sunset captioned with the words "They say time heals all wounds but how can it when you're so hurt"; a post nine days later promised, "This is going to be MY year."

After "SKAM Austin" launched, forty-one Instagram posts by Megan became public. A selfie that she had taken in front of a mirror included, on a wall in the background, an old photograph of her in a dance leotard. I was initially confused by the post's date—October 10, 2017—because Facebook Watch didn't



*"Hey, remember a few days ago, when all this was unacceptable?"*

announce that it had acquired “SKAM” until about a week afterward. Looking further, I could see that the two girls’ accounts included posts that had supposedly appeared in the summer of 2016. I thought about how thrilled Magnus and Andem must have been when they realized that, because Facebook owns Instagram, “SKAM” characters could now have fake Instagram histories that went back years.

In a scene that dropped on the day that Megan’s account became public, she video-chatted with a friend who had been with Marlon at another schoolmate’s house. “We left hours ago,” the friend told Megan. Later, Megan asked Marlon where he’d been, and he claimed that he’d just left the schoolmate’s house. Megan suspected that Marlon was secretly hooking up with Abby. So did viewers. “Anyone else think Marlon is cheating?” one poster asked, garnering fifty-four likes and thirty-four comments.

Fans soon noticed that, on Marlon’s Instagram account, a comment from Abby had appeared at the bottom of one of his posts: “CALL ME.” What did this mean? Screenshots of Abby’s comment spread across social media.

Minutes later, another clip appeared on Facebook Watch, which showed Megan opening her Instagram feed and clicking on the post from Marlon. She saw Abby’s comment and did a double take. She anxiously looked through Abby’s Instagram account, then tried to call Marlon, but was sent to voice mail. She returned to Marlon’s account. Abby’s comment had vanished! Who had deleted it? Abby or Marlon was the only possibility. The clip closed in on Megan’s face: you could see her drawing the same conclusion.

Viewers checked the fake Instagram account en masse, and discovered that Abby’s comment had indeed disappeared.

Ideally, the “SKAM” viewer experienced this sequence on two screens—one opened to Facebook and the other to Instagram. It was a bit of drama that seemed designed expressly for digital savants. Some viewers had clearly been left behind. “Why’d you delete @abby\_taffy’s comment?” one poster asked, receiving thirty-three likes. A poster named drake.301 asked if Megan and

Marlon were real. Another poster explained to him that “SKAM” was a show. Drake.301 said he knew that, but he seemed to think that he was watching reality TV. “Are they really a couple?” he asked. A user named its\_ayliin set him straight: “These accounts & posts are only for the purpose of the show, they aren’t real life.”

For people who find the digital hopscotch of “SKAM” too frenetic, the clips are packaged into compilations at the end of each week. More closely resembling ordinary TV “episodes,” they include credits, theme music, and Facebook Watch’s logo. Within two and a half weeks of the launch of “SKAM Austin,” the first compilation had accumulated 7.4 million views. Individual clips were averaging around a hundred and fifty thousand views. These numbers seemed impressive—recently, the season premiere of “Riverdale” attracted only 2.3 million viewers—but they may be misleading, since Facebook defines a “view” as someone looking at a video for at least three seconds. Facebook can easily tabulate how many viewers are watching an entire clip and how many are quickly clicking away, but it guards such information closely. I kept asking for these numbers, but Facebook executives declined to provide them.

During the show’s second week, I met with its social-strategy manager, Michael Hoffman, who, with a razor-fade haircut and joggers, looked young enough to be Marlon’s best friend. I had the impression that an online fan community for “SKAM” had emerged spontaneously, but Hoffman told me that he had carefully guided the process, in part by creating Facebook groups and Instagram pages to encourage interactivity. Facebook Watch, I learned, had generated some of the GIFs on the Instagram fan page; a young female fan on Instagram, who had posted a photograph of herself with “SKAM” scrawled across her chest in hot-pink lipstick, was a paid “influencer.”

Most fans didn’t seem to be bothered by such tactics—the influencer’s photograph received twelve hundred likes on the “SKAM” fan page. The Instagram page of Pameluft, another paid influencer, noted that her posts about “SKAM” were “sponsored,” yet com-

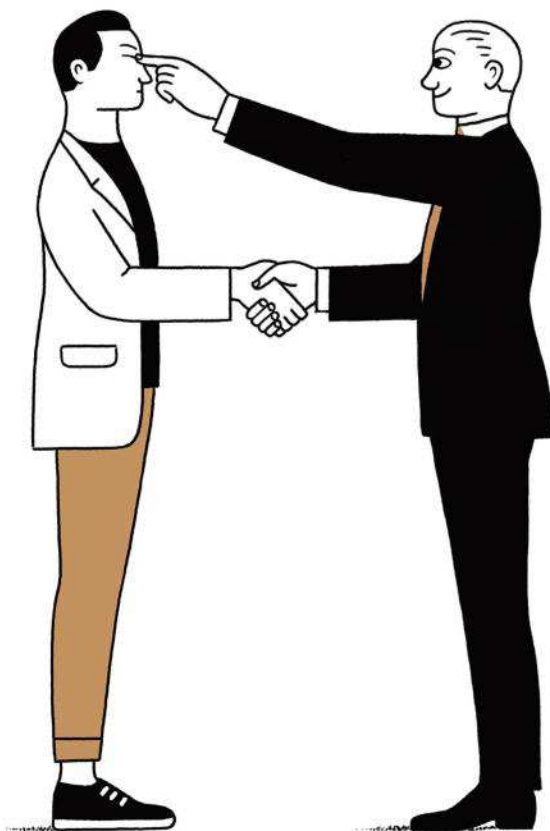
menters treated her as just another fan: “yes i love SKAM too omg,” a poster called N.UEO wrote. Hoffman told me, “It’s about injecting our work into the right places, seamlessly.”

The show is structurally so dazzling that it’s possible to overlook the fact that it also represents an advance in invasive corporate entertainment. During the week of Kendrick Lamar’s concert, his songs accompanied one slow-motion shot after another, and Megan’s Instagram account posted a photograph of Marlon with the caption “DAMN.”—the title of Lamar’s 2017 album. Like so many Internet creations, “SKAM” seems liberatory in its cleverness, but, like the latest killer app, its ultimate purpose is to make money.

Andem acknowledged that “SKAM” was trying to manipulate viewers for maximum engagement, but she has insisted that she is not making it in order to become rich. Her aim, she said, is to help American teens feel less alone. “I think that it’s maybe more important for the teens here, because it feels like they are even more dependent than Norwegian teens,” she told me. Since moving to Texas, she said, she had been surprised to discover how much time American teens spend with their parents.

True to its roots in public television, “SKAM” attempts to educate its audience, and its primary theme is that, if you keep trying, things will come out all right in the end. In the Norwegian version, the girl who is slut-shamed for kissing someone else’s boyfriend faces down her tormentors. A young man who attempts to suppress his homosexuality winds up accepting himself. And since the U.S. version seems to echo most of the Norwegian show’s broad plot points—as did iterations in France, Germany, and Italy—something similar is likely to happen in Austin. Predicting how much “SKAM Austin” will deviate from the original is a major source of engagement on fan sites, but, whatever the variations, the show’s message will be the same: shame is transitory; growth is lasting. “Teenagers need to build their self-esteem so that they are capable of being their own individuals, and making decisions on their own,” Andem said. “And ‘SKAM’ inspires young people to do that.” ♦





## WE'RE SORRY

BY ELLIS WEINER

**W**e know. We messed up. We had your trust, your loyalty, your Social Security numbers . . . and now we've lost all that. Somehow, we forgot what really matters.

Is it enough to say we're sorry? We don't think so. Because we want to make things right. And that starts with admitting to what we did—owning it—even when it wasn't entirely our fault, because nothing really happened.

So, yes, accounts were created that perhaps should not have been, in the names of customers who perhaps were unaware of them, or of us. Incorrect fees were charged. Credit ratings were improperly annihilated. People got sick, pets died in transit, and the entire population of Green Valley, Wis-

consin, was evicted from their homes.

Why? Maybe because we cared too much. Maybe because our field representatives were driven to succeed, to maximize profits, to meet or exceed target sales numbers by any means necessary. If that meant sitting down with clients, negotiating with clients, abducting clients from their places of employment, drugging clients, and confining clients to this or that motel in the New Mexico desert until they saw things our way, why, then, that's what somebody caused to happen.

Does it really matter who? Of course it does. And the answer is our C.E.O. He was so notoriously colorful and demonstrative and vindictive that he created a bad culture. He *said* things that

many found hurtful, *did* things that many thought inappropriate, *posted* things that many considered somewhat racist. And, yes, other mistakes were made. The pistol-whipping episode—he felt bad about that. We all did. That incident in the restaurant, with the chafing dish of flaming cherries jubilee and the business writer from the *Times*? There was no excuse for that.

That's why we're coming clean. We want you to know that we know that we cheated on certain emissions tests. We sourced our lettuce from providers who, epidemiologists *now* tell us, were not vetted as scrupulously as they could have been, or at all.

And then came the spam, the fake news, the bots, the manipulation of our platform by the Russians, and other things we ourselves didn't really do but were done somehow, by someone. People began to believe things that weren't literally true. It affected elections in our country and in other countries. There were riots. Governments fell. Political prisoners were executed en masse. It was a bad "look."

Did we know that our smart speaker was secretly recording your family's conversations and forwarding Danish translations of them to WikiLeaks? Probably not. Did we know that our facial-recognition software could be spoofed by someone wearing a rubber King Kong mask? We do now.

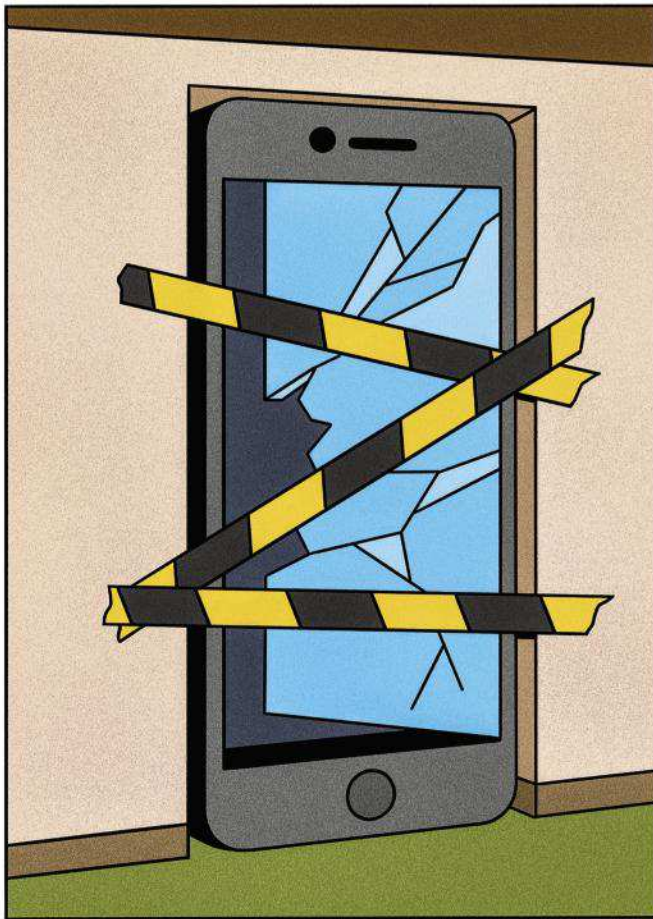
And so we're going to fix things. We're instituting a new culture—a culture of *listening*, and of telling you that we're listening, and of keeping you informed about our new culture. We're implementing a policy of enhanced background checks, so you can be confident that the employee who sulks or snaps at you or harasses you has a bachelor's degree or *better*. We're writing new algorithms to make sure that the news items you see in your feed are at least partly a hundred per cent true. We're eliminating target sales goals for local branch managers and announcing a policy of paying bonuses only for performance that exceeds a certain minimum.

We're doing all this and more because we want to win back your trust. If we can't win back your trust, then we'll make every effort to at least win back your business. Is that too much to ask? We don't think so. O.K.? Please? ♦

## NOWHERE TO HIDE

*Why do we care about privacy?*

BY LOUIS MENAND



The reason you've been receiving a steady stream of privacy-policy updates from online services, some of which you may have forgotten you ever subscribed to, is that the European Union just enacted the General Data Protection Regulation, which gives users greater control over the information that online companies collect about them. Since the Internet is a global medium, many companies now need to adhere to the E.U. regulation.

How many of us are going to take the time to scroll through the new policies and change our data settings, though? We sign up to get the service, but we don't give much thought to who

might be storing our clicks or what they're doing with our personal information. It is weird, at first, when our devices seem to "know" where we live or how old we are or what books we like or which brand of toothpaste we use. Then we grow to expect this familiarity, and even to like it. It makes the online world seem customized for us, and it cuts down on the time we need to map the route home or order something new to read. The machine anticipates what we want.

But, as it has become apparent in the past year, we don't really know who is seeing our data or how they're using it. Even the people whose business it

is to know don't know. When it came out that the consulting firm Cambridge Analytica had harvested the personal information of more than fifty million Facebook users and offered it to clients, including the Trump campaign, the *Times*' lead consumer-technology writer published a column titled "I Downloaded the Information That Facebook Has on Me. Yikes." He was astonished at how much of his personal data Facebook had stored and the long list of companies it had been sold to. Somehow, he had never thought to look into this before. How did he think Facebook became a five-hundred-and-sixty-billion-dollar company? It did so by devising the most successful system ever for compiling and purveying consumer data.

And data security wasn't even an issue: Cambridge Analytica didn't hack anyone. An academic researcher posted an online survey and invited people to participate by downloading an app. The app gave the researcher access not just to personal information in the participants' Facebook accounts (which Facebook allows) but to the personal information of all their "friends" (which Facebook allowed at the time). Cambridge Analytica, which hired the researcher, was thus able to collect the personal data of Facebook users who had never downloaded the app. Facebook at first refused to characterize this as a security breach—all the information was legally accessed, although it was not supposed to be sold—and continues to insist that it has no plans to provide recompense.

Cambridge Analytica isn't the only threat to digital privacy. The Supreme Court is set to decide the fate of Timothy Carpenter, who, in 2014, was convicted of participating in a series of armed robberies on the basis, in part, of records obtained by the police from his cell-phone company. These showed the location of the cell-phone towers his calls were routed through, and that information placed him near the scenes of the crimes. Carpenter was sentenced to a hundred and sixteen years in prison. The Court is being asked to rule on whether the collection of the cell-phone company's records violated his constitutional rights.

The government's position (argued before the Court last fall by Michael

*Amid ever-evolving technologies, the law is always playing catch-up.*



Dreeben, a Deputy Solicitor General, who is currently assisting the Mueller investigation) relies on what is known as the third-party doctrine. Police cannot listen in on your phone conversations without a warrant. But since Carpenter knowingly revealed his location to a third party, his cell-phone service provider, that information—called metadata—is not protected. It can be obtained with a court order, equivalent to a subpoena, which is served on the provider, not the customer. The third-party doctrine dates from a 1979 case, *Smith v. Maryland*, and it has been used to obtain, for example, suspects' bank records.

The third-party doctrine is what made legal the use of a pen register, a device that records all outgoing and incoming calls, on the phones of Donald Trump's lawyer Michael Cohen. Rather more consequentially, it was the legal justification for the National Security Agency's collection of metadata for all the incoming and outgoing calls of every person in the United States between 2001 and 2015. You "gave" that information to your phone service, just as you gave your credit-card company information about where and when you bought your last iced latte and how much you paid for it. The government can obtain that information with minimal judicial oversight.

Meanwhile, of course, Alexa is listening. Last month, an Oregon couple's domestic conversation (about hardwood floors, they said) was recorded by Echo, Amazon's "smart speaker" for the home, which sent it as an audio file to one of the husband's employees. Amazon called the event "an extremely rare occurrence"—that is, not a systemic security issue.

The good that is said to sit at the nexus of these developments in technology, commerce, and the law is privacy. "It's *private!*" kids are always yelling at their parents and siblings, which suggests that there is something primal about the need for privacy, for secrecy, for hiding places and personal space. These are things we seem to want. But do we have a right to them?

In 1948, the District of Columbia, in an arrangement with Muzak, the company that sells background music for stores and hotel lobbies, began piping radio broadcasts into the city's

trolleys and buses. The broadcasts were mostly music, with some commercials and announcements, and were not loud enough to prevent riders from talking to one another. On the other hand, riders could not not hear them. Complaints were received, and a survey was duly commissioned. The survey found that ninety-two per cent of bus and trolley riders did not have a problem with the broadcasts. So they continued.

Two customers, however, chose to take a stand. They were Franklin Pollak and Guy Martin, and they happened to be lawyers. These gentlemen sued the city. Being compelled to listen to a radio program not of their choosing on a public bus, they maintained, represented an unlawful deprivation of liberty under the Constitution. The case made it all the way to the United States Supreme Court.

The Court handed down its decision in 1952. A bus, it said, is not like a home. It is a public space, and in a public space the public interest prevails. As long as the city government has the comfort, safety, and convenience of its riders at heart, it can run its transportation system any way it wants. Pollak and Martin had no more right to demand quiet on the bus than they had to tell the driver where to stop.

The vote was 7–1. One Justice, Felix Frankfurter, recused himself. Frankfurter explained that his own aversion to Muzak was so visceral—"my feelings are so strongly engaged as a victim," he wrote—that he was incapable of attaining the degree of disinterestedness necessary to render a judgment. (This posture is pretty much Felix Frankfurter in a nutshell.)

The lone dissenter was William O. Douglas. Douglas was a judicial renegade, with little concern for precedent. "We write," he began his dissent, "on a clean slate." Finding no rule, he provided one. Freedom was the issue, he explained, and "the beginning of all freedom" is "the right to be let alone"—that is, the right to privacy. To Douglas, more was at stake than annoying background music. Forcing people to listen to the radio, he said, is a step on the road to totalitarianism. If you can tell people what to listen to, you can tell people what

to think. "The right of privacy," Douglas concluded, "is a powerful deterrent to any one who would control men's minds."

Douglas did not coin the phrase "the right to be let alone." It appears in one of the most famous law-review articles ever written, "The Right to Privacy," by Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, published in the *Harvard Law Review* in 1890. (Warren and Brandeis took it from an 1879 treatise on tort law.) And "The Right to Privacy" is where Sarah Igo begins "The Known Citizen" (Harvard), her mighty effort to tell the story of modern America as a story of anxieties about privacy.

Igo's first book, "The Averaged American," was a well-received study of how twentieth-century social researchers created the idea of a "mass public." Her new effort has to be mighty because, as she admits at the start, privacy is a protean concept—"elastic" is the term she uses—and, once you start looking for it, it pops up almost everywhere. Every new technological, legal, and cultural development seems to have prompted someone to worry about the imminent death of privacy. In the nineteenth century, people were shocked by the introduction of postcards, which invited strangers to read your mail. Mail was supposed to be private.

The Muzak case is not in Igo's book, but plenty else is. She takes on telegraphy, telephony, instantaneous photography (snapshots), dactyloscopy (fingerprinting), Social Security numbers, suburbanization, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, Fourth Amendment jurisprudence, abortion rights, gay liberation, human-subject research, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, "60 Minutes," Betty Ford, the 1973 PBS documentary "An American Family," the Starr Report, the memoir craze, blogging, and social media. Igo is an intelligent interpreter of the facts, and her intelligence frequently leads her to the conclusion that "privacy" lacks any stable significance. Privacy is associated with liberty, but it is also associated with privilege (private roads and private sales), with confidentiality (private conversations), with non-conformity and dissent, with shame

and embarrassment, with the deviant and the taboo (Igo does not go there), and with subterfuge and concealment.

Sometimes, as in Douglas's dissent, privacy functions as a kind of default right when an injury has been inflicted and no other right seems to suit the case. Douglas got a second crack at applying his theory of privacy as a constitutional right in 1965, in the case of *Griswold v. Connecticut*. At issue was a Connecticut law that made the use of contraception a crime. "Specific guarantees in the Bill of Rights," Douglas wrote for the Court, "have penumbras, formed by emanations from those guarantees that help give them life and substance." The right to privacy was formed out of such emanations.

What places contraception beyond the state's police powers—its right to pass laws to protect the health and welfare of its citizens? The answer, Douglas said, is something that predates the Constitution: the institution of marriage. "Marriage is a coming together for better or for worse, hopefully enduring, and intimate to the degree of being sacred," he wrote. It is beyond politics and even beyond law. (Douglas, incidentally, was married four

times.) Eight years later, *Griswold* was a key precedent in another case about reproductive rights, *Roe v. Wade*. "The right to privacy," the Court said in that case, "is broad enough to encompass a woman's decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy."

Igo notes that often privacy is simply a weapon that comes to hand in social combat. People invoke their right to privacy when it serves their interests. This is obviously true of "fruit of the poisonous tree" arguments, as when defendants ask the court to throw out evidence obtained in an unauthorized search. But it's also true when celebrities complain that their privacy is being invaded by photographers and gossip columnists. Reporters intrude on privacy in the name of the public's "right to know," and are outraged when asked to reveal their sources.

People are inconsistent about the kind of exposure they'll tolerate. We don't like to be fingerprinted by government agencies, a practice we associate with mug shots and state surveillance, but we happily hand our thumbprints over to Apple, which does God knows what with them. A require-

ment that every citizen carry an I.D. card seems un-American, but we all memorize our Social Security numbers and recite the last four digits pretty much any time we're asked.

A lot of people considered reports about which videos Clarence Thomas rented to be relevant to the question of whether he was qualified to sit on the Supreme Court, and a lot of people hoped that someone would leak Donald Trump's income-tax returns. But many of the same people were indignant about the publication of the Starr Report, on the Oval Office sex-capades of Bill Clinton. Sex is supposed to be private.

Privacy has value, in other words, and, as Igo points out, sometimes the value is realized by hoarding it and sometimes it's realized by cashing it out. Once, it was thought that gay people were better off keeping their sexuality secret. Then it was decided that they were better off making their sexuality public, and, almost overnight, privacy became a sign of hypocrisy.

In the nineteen-seventies and eighties, people began making themselves famous, and sometimes wealthy, by exposing their and other people's lives on television and in books. Some of these glimpses into private life were stage-managed, like the TV show "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." Some were exposés, like many of the books and programs about the Kennedys. And some, like "An American Family," the PBS documentary about the Loud family, were both revealing and self-promoting. But reality shows and confessional memoirs did not mark the death of privacy. On the contrary, they confirmed how valuable a commodity privacy is.

Privacy is especially valuable to criminals. The same Fourth Amendment rights that prohibit the government from entering your home and listening to your conversations without a warrant also protect people engaged in illegal activities. Figuring out when law enforcement is crossing the line in getting the goods on criminal suspects has been an unending job for the courts.

The job is unending because technology is always changing. The govern-



*"I'm at that point in my life when I don't want my parents to tell me what to do but I still want to blame them for it."*



ment now has many methods besides tapping into your phone wire—you probably don't even have a phone wire—for finding out what you're up to. How far the constitutional right to privacy can be made to stretch is the subject of Cyrus Farivar's lively history of recent Fourth Amendment jurisprudence, "Habeas Data: Privacy vs. the Rise of Surveillance Tech" (Melville House).

Warren and Brandeis's article on privacy, back in 1890, said nothing about the Constitution. It argued that a right to privacy is inherent in the common law, and generated various "privacy torts," such as the disclosure of private facts or the unauthorized use of someone's name or likeness. Igo is a bit dismissive of "The Right to Privacy." She calls it "a strategy for re-establishing proper social boundaries and regulating public morality"—an attempt by the privileged to keep unwanted photographs and salacious gossip out of the newspapers by threatening legal action. And it is true that privacy, like many civil rights, can serve as a protection for property owners and the status quo generally. But inside "The Right to Privacy" was a time bomb, and, almost forty years later, it went off.

Roy Olmstead was a big-time Seattle bootlegger who was convicted of conspiracy to violate the Prohibition Act, in part on the basis of evidence gathered through government wiretaps. In *Olmstead v. United States*, decided in 1928, the Supreme Court affirmed the conviction. But Louis Brandeis was now an Associate Justice on the Court, and he filed a dissent. Brandeis argued that because the government had broken the law—wiretapping was a crime in the state of Washington—the evidence gained from the wiretap should have been excluded at Olmstead's trial. His rights had been violated. "The right to be let alone," Brandeis wrote, is "the most comprehensive of rights, and the right most valued by civilized men." Those are, of course, the sentiments that William O. Douglas echoed twenty-four years later in the Muzak case.

Brandeis's opinion in *Olmstead* is one of those dissents which outlive the decision. And, in 1967, in *Katz v. United States*, the Supreme Court overturned

*Olmstead*. Charles Katz lived in an apartment house on Sunset Boulevard, in Los Angeles. Almost every day, he walked down the street to a bank of three telephone booths, entered one of them, and made a long-distance call. Katz was a handicapper; he was calling his bookie, in Massachusetts. He had been making his living this way for thirty years.

To catch him, the F.B.I. placed microphones on top of two of the phone booths and put an "Out of Order" sign on the third. After recording Katz for six days, agents arrested him and obtained a warrant to search his apartment, where they found ample evidence of gambling. The question before the Supreme Court was whether the use of microphones on the phone booths violated Katz's Fourth Amendment rights.

The Fourth Amendment had always been understood in terms of trespass. It prohibits the government from violating the sanctity of private property—a home or an office—without a warrant. But Katz was not in a home or an office. He was in a public space. It may have seemed wrong for the F.B.I. to listen in on his conversations without a warrant, but it was hard, under existing jurisprudence, to explain why it was unconstitutional.

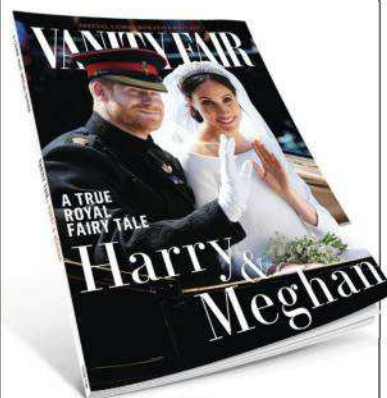
The Court found a fix. Persuaded by Katz's attorney, Harvey Schneider, and by a young lawyer clerking for Justice Potter Stewart, Laurence Tribe (now a well-known Harvard law professor), it changed its interpretation of the Fourth Amendment. The right to privacy does not attach to property, the Court now said; it attaches to persons. Charles Katz carried that right with him, and whatever he did "with a reasonable expectation of privacy" the government was barred from eavesdropping on.

Katz became a key precedent in Fourth Amendment cases. Intuitively, the reasoning appears sound. If it is unconstitutional to tap a telephone without a warrant, it seems obvious that using a microphone to record a phone conversation (in Katz's case, half of a conversation) should also be unconstitutional. But there are two problems at the heart of *Katz*. The first is the distinction between a microphone

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and an ear. If Katz had spoken loudly enough to be overheard by agents standing outside the phone booth, his words could have been used as evidence against him in a court of law. In effect, the microphone was just a prosthetic device, an extension of the agents' ears. It was not hearing differently; it was only hearing better.

As Farivar shows us, technology continually poses problems of this kind. Take the case of *Jones v. United States*, in which police attached a G.P.S. tracking device to the Jeep of Antoine Jones, who was suspected of being a drug dealer, and followed his movements for four weeks. The Supreme Court found that the use of the device violated Jones's right to privacy. Theoretically, the police could have trailed Jones's Jeep in a car or a helicopter, or posted officers along every road in the area, and the evidence they gathered would have been admissible. The tracking device only improved law-enforcement efficiency. Why did it trigger the Fourth Amendment? In the majority opinion, by Antonin Scalia, the Court reverted to the trespass theory: it was the physical trespass onto Jones's property, his Jeep, that required a warrant.

In another case, *Kyllo v. United States*, police used a thermal-imaging device to monitor the apartment of one Danny Lee Kyllo. The device recorded an unusual amount of heat radiating from the walls and the roof. Police used this information to obtain a search warrant, and discovered that Kyllo was operating a marijuana farm in his apartment. The Supreme Court ruled that evidence gained from a thermal device cannot be used to get a warrant—even though an officer on the sidewalk who noticed the heat could have used his observations to obtain one, and the thermal device simply allowed detectives to “feel” the heat at a distance.

The other problem in *Katz* is the “reasonable expectation of privacy” standard. Again, the rule seems sensible. People assume that when they are talking inside a phone booth they are not being monitored. But who gets to claim an expectation of privacy and where is not self-evident. Can a person driving a rented car whose name

is not on the agreement with the rental company? Last month, the Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision, said yes. And as Anthony Amsterdam, a law professor who argued, and won, the famous death-penalty case *Furman v. Georgia*, in 1972, has pointed out, people's reasonable expectations are easily altered.

If people are told by the government or by a service provider that their behavior is being monitored, the expectation of privacy instantly becomes unreasonable. Twenty years ago, for example, citizens could assume that they were not being photographed when they walked down the street. Today, there are thirty thousand closed-circuit surveillance cameras on the streets of Chicago alone. A cop can theoretically match up a face on the street with a mug shot; with facial-recognition technology, the CCTV system does it automatically.

Police now have license-plate readers, which are mounted on squad cars and use optical-character-recognition technology to record license-plate numbers. Farivar says that the city of Oakland collects forty-eight thousand license-plate numbers a day. What concerns him is not that license plates are being read but that they are being read and recorded by a machine. We don't object when a cop checks a license-plate number against a list in a notebook. We con-



sider that good police work, a way to identify traffic-ticket scofflaws and to find stolen cars. The fact that the cop has been replaced by a robot can summon up images of “1984.” But you could argue that the robot is just way more efficient.

Farivar, in short, is correct that among the many things the tech industry has disrupted is Fourth Amendment jurisprudence. The law is constantly playing catch-up. In the digital

age, almost all transactions are recorded somewhere, and almost any information worth keeping private involves a third party. Most of us store more in the cloud than in lockboxes. It does not make sense to constrain the technological capacities of law enforcement just because the technology allows it to work more efficiently, but those capacities can also lead to a society whose citizens have nowhere to hide.

And, even if its applications are brought up to date, the Fourth Amendment is good only against the government. Restricting a corporation's use of personal data requires a legislative act, and Congress is a barely functioning body. As for the Trump Administration, it seems indifferent to any rights except those which are enumerated in the Second Amendment or which might protect the President and his henchmen. There is also the extraordinary economic power of the tech industry, a major engine of growth whose enormous cash reserves make legal settlements low-impact capital events.

Igo does what historians do: she shows us that although we may feel that the threat to privacy today is unprecedented, every generation has felt that way since the introduction of the postcard. The government is doing what it has always done, which is to conduct surveillance of individuals and groups it suspects of presenting a danger to society. And commercial media are doing what they have always done, which is to use consumer information to sell advertising. Of course Facebook does this. So do CBS and *People*.

What makes us feel powerless today is the scale. Fifty years ago, the government could not have collected the metadata for every phone call in a fourteen-year period. The technology did not exist (or would have been prohibitively expensive). Radio and television enabled advertisers to come right into your living room, but the reach of online industries is vaster by many orders of magnitude. Last month, the season finale of CBS's most popular show, “The Big Bang Theory,” had roughly fifteen million viewers, and *People* reaches an estimated forty-one million readers a week. Those are tiny numbers. Facebook has 2.2



billion active monthly users. Google processes 3.5 billion searches every day.

"The twin imperatives of corporate profit and national security," Igo says, militate against greater privacy protections. A classic contest between them played out in the wake of the San Bernardino massacre. In 2015, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, a married couple, killed fourteen people and wounded twenty-two in that terrorist attack. Farook and Malik died in a shoot-out with police, who retrieved an iPhone carried by Farook. When the National Security Agency was unable to unlock the device, the F.B.I. asked Apple to do it.

Apple refused, on the ground that its business would suffer if customers knew that third parties could hack into their phones. The government accused Apple of marketing to criminals, and sued. The case was in the courts when the F.B.I. found someone to sell it a tool that unlocked the phone, and the lawsuit was dropped. Three media companies subsequently sued under the Freedom of Information Act to compel the government to reveal the identity of the person or the firm that sold the F.B.I. the unlocking tool, but last fall a federal judge ruled that the information was classified as a matter of national security. How a public agency got something a private corporation was trying to keep a secret is a secret. This is the world we are living in.

The question about national security and personal convenience is always: At what price? What do we have to give up? On the criminal-justice side, law enforcement is in an arms race with lawbreakers. Timothy Carpenter was allegedly able to orchestrate an armed-robbery gang in two states because he had a cell phone; the law makes it difficult for police to learn how he used it. Thanks to lobbying by the National Rifle Association, federal law prohibits the National Tracing Center from using a searchable database to identify the owners of guns seized at crime scenes. Whose privacy is being protected there?

Most citizens feel glad for privacy protections like the one in *Griswold*, but are less invested in protections like the one in *Katz*. In "*Habeas Data*," Farivar analyzes ten Fourth Amend-

TODAY ON "ALL THINGS CONSIDERED": A TREE, BOWLING, THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM, LARGE HATS, DAVID DUCHOVNY, UNDERCOOKED LENTILS, PARACHUTES, AND THE COLOR MAROON.

ment cases; all ten of the plaintiffs were criminals. We want their rights to be observed, but we also want them locked up.

On the commercial side, are the trade-offs equivalent? The market-theory expectation is that if there is demand for greater privacy then competition will arise to offer it. Services like Signal and WhatsApp already do this. Consumers will, of course, have to balance privacy with convenience. The question is: Can they really? The General Data Protection Regulation went into effect on May 25th, and privacy-advocacy groups in Europe are already filing lawsuits claiming that the policy updates circulated by companies like Facebook and Google are not in compliance. How can you ever be sure who is eating your cookies?

Possibly the discussion is using the wrong vocabulary. "Privacy" is an odd name for the good that is being threatened by commercial exploitation and state surveillance. Privacy implies "It's nobody's business," and that is not really what *Roe v. Wade* is about, or what the E.U. regulations are about, or even what *Katz* and Carpenter are about. The real issue is the one that Pollak and Martin, in their suit against the District of Columbia in the Muzak

case, said it was: liberty. This means the freedom to choose what to do with your body, or who can see your personal information, or who can monitor your movements and record your calls—who gets to surveil your life and on what grounds.

As we are learning, the danger of data collection by online companies is not that they will use it to try to sell you stuff. The danger is that that information can so easily fall into the hands of parties whose motives are much less benign. A government, for example. A typical reaction to worries about the police listening to your phone conversations is the one Gary Hart had when it was suggested that reporters might tail him to see if he was having affairs: "You'd be bored." They were not, as it turned out. We all may underestimate our susceptibility to persecution. "We were just talking about hardwood floors!" we say. But authorities who feel emboldened by the promise of a Presidential pardon or by a Justice Department that looks the other way may feel less inhibited about invading the spaces of people who belong to groups that the government has singled out as unpatriotic or undesirable. And we now have a government that does that. ♦

# THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

*How Donald Trump, Israel, and the Gulf states plan to fight Iran—and leave the Palestinians and the Obama years behind.*

BY ADAM ENTOUS

On the afternoon of December 14, 2016, Ron Dermer, Israel's Ambassador to the United States, rode from his Embassy to the White House to attend a Hanukkah party. The Obama Administration was in its final days, and among the guests were some of the President's most ardent Jewish supporters, who were there to bid him farewell. But Dermer, like Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, did not share their sense of loss. For the Israeli leadership, the Trump Presidency could not come soon enough.

Netanyahu believed that Barack Obama had "no special feeling" for the Jewish state, as one of his aides once put it, and he resented Obama's argument that Israel's treatment of the Palestinians was a violation of basic human rights and an obstacle to security, not least for Israel itself. He also believed that Obama's attempt to foster a kind of balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East was naïve, and that it underestimated the depth of Iran's malign intentions throughout the region.

Obama was hardly anti-Israel. His Administration had provided the country with immense military and intelligence support. He had also protected Netanyahu in the United Nations Security Council, when, in 2011, he issued his only veto, blocking a resolution condemning Jewish settlement building. And Obama opposed efforts by the Palestinians to join the International Criminal Court, after Netanyahu shouted over the telephone to the President's advisers that "this is a nuclear warhead aimed at my crotch!" (Netanyahu's office disputes the American account of the call.)

Some of Netanyahu's supporters believed that the Prime Minister bore comparison to Richard Nixon, whose anti-Communist credentials gave him

the political capacity to open the door to diplomatic relations with China. Dennis Ross, an adviser on Middle Eastern affairs during Obama's first term, frequently told the President and members of the national-security team that there were two Netanyahus—the "strategic Bibi," who was willing to make concessions, and the "political Bibi," who pursued his immediate electoral interest. Ross made the point so often that, during one exchange in the Oval Office, Obama stopped him with a palm in front of his face: he had heard enough.

Over time, Obama and his advisers came to believe that Netanyahu had been playing them, occasionally feigning interest in a two-state solution while expanding settlements in the West Bank, thus making the creation of a viable Palestinian state increasingly difficult to conceive. By Obama's second term, his aides no longer bothered to mask their frustration with the Israelis. "They were never sincere in their commitment to peace," Benjamin Rhodes, one of Obama's closest foreign-policy advisers, told me. "They used us as cover, to make it look like they were in a peace process. They were running a play, killing time, waiting out the Administration."

The relationship between Obama and Netanyahu grew more poisonous every year. In 2012, Obama's team suspected that the Israeli leadership backed Mitt Romney's Presidential campaign. Tensions between Susan Rice, Obama's national-security adviser, and Ron Dermer were so fierce that they never met alone. The Administration became convinced that Netanyahu, after years of threatening to use force against Iran, was bluffing, that he was really trying to goad the Americans into taking a harder line and even launching strikes of their own. One of Obama's advisers was quoted as calling Netanyahu a "chickenshit," causing a diplomatic up-

roar. Not everyone close to Obama regretted the epithet. One of the President's top aides told another, "The only problem with the quote was that it wasn't strong enough. It should have been 'chickenshit motherfucker.'" By the spring of 2015, after Netanyahu delivered a theatrical speech to Congress condemning the Iran nuclear deal, Obama was "officially done pretending," Rhodes said.

An era seemed to be ending. The 1993 Oslo Accords and subsequent negotiations had raised hopes among Palestinians that they would get a state comprising Gaza, the West Bank, and, as a capital, some part of East Jerusalem. But after years of settlement building, a second intifada, instability throughout the region, and the rise of absolutism on both sides, a paralyzing mistrust took hold. Although around half of Israelis and Palestinians still want two states, neither side believes the other will move forward in good faith.

Late in Obama's second term, Secretary of State John Kerry brought to the White House a stack of maps of the West Bank that were prepared by the State Department and vetted by U.S. intelligence agencies. Kerry spread out the maps on a large coffee table. As Frank Lowenstein, one of Kerry's top advisers, put it to me, the maps allowed him to see "the forest for the trees." When the settlement zones, the illegal outposts, and the other areas off limits to Palestinian development were consolidated, they covered almost sixty per cent of the West Bank. "It looked like a brain tumor," an official who attended the session told me. "No matter what metric you're using—existing blocs, new settlements, illegal outposts—you're confronting the end of the two-state solution."

Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority, had lost all





*Trump's team appears unfazed by the feeling among Palestinians that they are being cast aside.*

faith in the Administration's efforts. "You've been telling me to wait, and telling me to wait, and telling me to wait," a former official recalled Abbas saying to Kerry during one particularly tense exchange. "You can't deliver the Israelis."

In late September, 2016, Obama flew to Israel for the funeral of Shimon Peres, the former Prime Minister, who shared the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize with Yasir Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin for his part in the Oslo Accords. The signs of a shifting political climate were clear. Abbas attended the funeral, but he wasn't acknowledged by any of the Israeli leaders in their remarks. After the service, veterans of the negotiations gathered on the terrace of the King David Hotel, in Jerusalem, for an impromptu lunch. Martin Indyk, the former U.S. special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, told the group, "This is the wake for the Oslo process."

When Obama and the American delegation arrived back in the U.S., they learned that the Israeli government had approved the building of a new settlement in the West Bank. A top Obama adviser said that the move amounted to an unmistakable "F.U."

And so, unlike the melancholy well-wishers who shouted "We love you, Mr. President!" to Obama at the White House Hanukkah party, Dermer saw the election of Donald Trump as an opportunity. Trump's team promised a markedly more compliant policy where Israel was concerned. Later that day, Dermer went to another Hanukkah party, where he was far more welcome, just down Pennsylvania Avenue, at the Trump International Hotel. As Dermer told me, "We saw light at the end of the tunnel."

The Israelis did have one lingering fear. They worried that, before Obama left office, his Administration would attempt to punish them at the U.N. Security Council. Israeli spy agencies had picked up on discussions about possible Security Council resolutions, ranging from a condemnation of settlements to a measure that would enshrine in international law so-called "final status" parameters, locking in Obama's position on the two-state solution. Israeli officials say that intelligence reports submitted to Netanyahu

showed that Obama and his team were secretly orchestrating the U.N. resolutions—a charge that the Americans later denied. Just after Trump's election victory, Dermer expressed his anxieties about a possible resolution to Vice-President Joe Biden and told Denis McDonough, Obama's chief of staff, "Don't go to the U.N. It will force us into a confrontation. It will force us to reach out to the other side." The "other side," in this case, was the President-elect. (McDonough declined to comment, but officials close to him disputed Dermer's account.)

The Israelis already had ties to the Trump family: Netanyahu had a long friendship with Charles Kushner, the father of Ivanka Trump's husband, Jared Kushner. In recent years, the Kushners, Orthodox Jews who made their fortune in the real-estate business and hold conservative views on Israel, have donated large sums of money to Israeli causes and charities, including tens of thousands of dollars to a yeshiva in the Beit El settlement, in the West Bank. When Netanyahu visited the Kushners at their home in New Jersey, he sometimes stayed overnight and slept in Jared's bedroom, while Jared was relegated to the basement.

Dermer, who grew up in a political family in Miami Beach and moved to Israel in 1996, recalled accompanying Netanyahu to Trump Tower, in New York, in the early aughts for a meeting with Donald Trump. Dermer and Trump met again in 2014, at an alumni dinner at the Wharton School of Business. Dermer, who had become Ambassador to the U.S. the year before, gave a speech in which he said that he had chosen Wharton after reading Trump's book "The Art of the Deal." "If you were going to make a career in business, Wharton was the place to go," Trump wrote. Dermer did not stint on flattery. "Mr. Trump, I wanted to be your apprentice," he said, referring to Trump's reality-TV show. In March, 2016, Dermer was introduced to Jared Kushner by Gary Ginsberg, an executive at Time-Warner who had helped write speeches for Netanyahu. Dermer and Kushner stayed in close touch throughout the campaign and the transition.

These relationships paid off during the U.N. battle and beyond. In late De-

cember, 2016, Egypt, on behalf of the Palestinians, began circulating among Security Council members a draft settlements resolution, causing alarm in the Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem. After consulting with Netanyahu, Dermer called Kushner and told him that the Obama Administration was leading the efforts at the United Nations. Dermer asked for the transition team's help in blunting the work of the sitting President.

This was an audacious move, particularly for a client state. The President-elect customarily follows the principle known as "one President at a time." Obama's aides thought of the U.N. settlements resolution as largely symbolic, but Netanyahu behaved as though Israel were in mortal danger. He feared that a second, more far-reaching resolution setting out the parameters of a Palestinian state would soon reach the Security Council. The Israelis found the Trump circle easy to persuade. Trump and his closest advisers shared Netanyahu's antipathy toward Obama. They had no government or diplomatic experience, and were eager to please their staunchly pro-Israel and pro-Likud base. American and Israeli officials told me that the Israeli government's use of its intelligence capabilities to pit the President-elect against the sitting President had no modern precedent. What's more, Trump and his team seemed more trusting of a foreign leader and his intelligence than they were of the President of the United States and American intelligence agencies.

Under pressure from Netanyahu and Trump, Egypt withdrew its sponsorship of the resolution, but four other Security Council members picked it up and pushed for a vote. Kushner had asked Obama's aides for a "heads-up" if a resolution was in the works, so when he heard a vote was coming he felt that the Trump team had been deceived. As Obama was making his final moves at the United Nations, Kushner told aides, "They had their turn. They failed. Why are they trying to make our job harder on the way out?" Kushner called Michael Flynn, the choice for national-security adviser, and Steve Bannon, Trump's strategic adviser. Bannon had grown so fond of Dermer that he sometimes referred to



him as “my wingman.” The decision was made to press Security Council members to delay the ballot or defeat the resolution. Flynn got off the phone with Kushner and told aides that this was Trump’s “No. 1 priority.”

The Trump transition team proved woefully unprepared to carry out its task, scrambling just to get telephone numbers for the ambassadors and foreign ministers they’d need to lobby. Flynn did know how to find one of them: Sergey Kislyak, the Russian Ambassador. (Flynn and Kislyak had been in contact, including during the transition, and their communications later became a focus of the investigation undertaken by Robert Mueller, the special counsel, into Russian meddling in the 2016 election. The F.B.I. had been monitoring Kislyak’s communications as part of its routine surveillance of foreign spies and diplomats.) But even that connection didn’t help. Instead of issuing a veto, Obama abstained. The settlements resolution passed, with support from the Russians. A second resolution never materialized.

A few weeks after Trump’s Inauguration, Dermer and other Israeli officials visited the White House to share a summary of Israel’s intelligence documenting the alleged role of Obama Administration officials in the settlements resolution. The Israelis also provided the Americans, through “intelligence channels,” with some of their underlying intelligence reports on the U.S. role. (Israeli officials said that their intelligence on the Obama Administration’s alleged activities was not based on direct spying on the Americans. The United States spies on Israel, but Israel claims that it doesn’t spy on the United States. U.S. officials dispute that claim and consider Israel to be one of the United States’ biggest counterintelligence threats.)

Trump had run for office as a non-interventionist, with the slogan “America First.” “He quite honestly had very little interest in meddling in the Middle East in general and very little interest from a philosophical point of view,” a Trump confidant told me. As far as Trump was concerned, “all of this was an annoyance.” He went on, “The Sunnis, the Shias, the Jews, the Palestinians have been doing this for thou-

sands of years, and I, Donald Trump, am not going to continue to add to the already outrageous investment of trillions of dollars in a region that breeds and funds terrorists against America while we starve our infrastructure investments at home!”

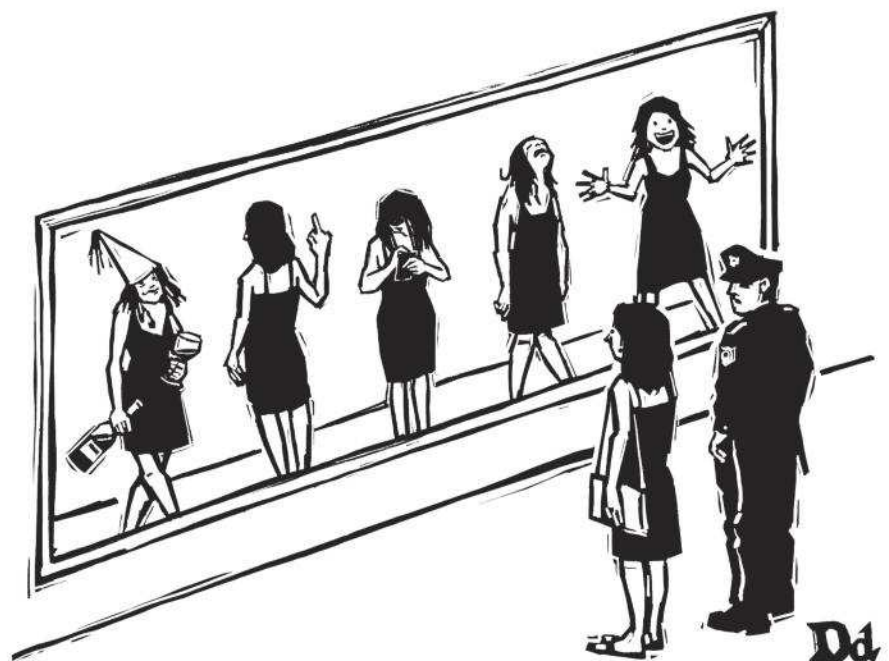
With Obama finally out of the way, Netanyahu could concentrate on getting the Trump team to embrace his grand strategy for transforming the direction of Middle Eastern politics. His overarching ambition was to diminish the Palestinian cause as a focus of world attention and to form a coalition with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to combat Iran, which had long supported Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and had taken strategic advantage of the American folly in Iraq and the war in Syria.

Obama had not been at all naïve about Iran’s behavior, but he felt that the nuclear agreement would limit its power. Trying to topple the Iranian regime seemed to Obama dangerously in line with previous adventures in the Middle East, in which dreams of democratic revolution backed by force ended in nightmare. What’s more, Obama was wary of efforts by the Saudis, who were hardly champions of democracy and human rights, to pull him deeper into regional conflicts.

But the Israelis, the Gulf states, and

now Trump believed the opposite—that Iran was the principal enemy in the region and that the nuclear pact showed weakness, and only fuelled Iranian expansionism. Before the Inauguration, Netanyahu had taken the bold step of quietly dispatching Yossi Cohen, the head of Mossad, Israel’s foreign-intelligence agency, to Washington. Cohen briefed Flynn on the Iranian threat, in an attempt to insure that the two governments would be closely aligned in their approach. (Intelligence veterans said that Cohen’s visit was a breach of protocol.)

Trump did not exactly scour the U.S. diplomatic corps to staff his foreign-policy team, and Netanyahu had every reason to believe that the central figures in the new Administration had a “special feeling” for Israel. Trump put Jared Kushner in putative charge of Middle East policy. The choice for Ambassador to Israel was David Friedman, a bankruptcy lawyer from Long Island who held right-wing views on the Middle East and contributed money in support of the same West Bank settlement as the Kushners. The chief envoy to the region would be Jason Greenblatt, a graduate of Yeshiva University and an attorney who worked for the Trump Organization. Netanyahu could be confident that Trump would look out for his interests and share his opposition to



*“Which version of yourself was the one who sabotaged the relationship?”*



Obama's policies in the region. Even before Trump entered the White House, Israeli officials talked about having more influence and a freer hand than ever before. Dermer had planned to return to Israel in 2017, but he agreed to remain in place as Ambassador to help Netanyahu capitalize on the turn of events.

On Inauguration Day, State Department buses carried members of the diplomatic corps to the Capitol. The ambassadors in attendance had radically different perspectives on the incoming Administration. The French Ambassador, Gérard Araud, had tweeted after the election, "A world is collapsing before our eyes. Vertigo." The presence of Kislyak took some observers by surprise. One of the European ambassadors at the ceremony said to Kislyak, "You are the most important ambassador here today!" Kislyak smiled and gestured at Ron Dermer. Actually, Kislyak said, "he is the most important ambassador here today."

There was one other Middle Eastern ambassador who had extraordinary access to the new President's team: Yousef Al Otaiba, of the United Arab Emirates. Otaiba had been introduced

to Kushner during the campaign by Thomas Barrack, a Lebanese-American billionaire who was raising money for Trump and was friendly with Otaiba's father. Barrack knew that Kushner was already working closely with Dermer, and he thought Trump's team needed to hear the Gulf Arab perspective.

Traditionally, Gulf leaders frowned on contact with Israeli government officials, but Otaiba's boss, Mohammed bin Zayed, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, the most politically important of the emirates, took a different view. Bin Zayed, known as M.B.Z., believed that the Gulf states and Israel shared a common enemy: Iran. Like Netanyahu, M.B.Z. considered Iran to be the primary threat to his country.

The secret relationship between Israel and the U.A.E. can be traced back to a series of meetings in a nondescript office in Washington, D.C., after the signing of the Oslo Accords. Early in Bill Clinton's first term, the U.A.E. wanted to buy advanced F-16 fighter aircraft from the U.S., but American and Emirati officials were concerned that Israel would protest. When Jeremy Issacharoff, an Israeli diplomat working out of the Embassy in Wash-

ington, was asked whether his government would have problems with the proposed sale, he was noncommittal, according to former U.S. officials. He told his American counterparts that the Israelis wanted the opportunity to discuss the matter directly with the Emiratis, to find out how they intended to use the American aircraft.

Sandra Charles, a former George H.W. Bush Administration official who was doing consulting work at the time for M.B.Z., agreed to convey the request about a possible meeting. As part of her work with the U.A.E., Charles's firm provided assistance to Jamal S. Al-Suwaidi, an Emirati academic who, in 1994, was setting up a government-backed think tank in Abu Dhabi called the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research. The center was established "for scientific research and studies on social, economic, and political issues," but it became a conduit for contacts with Israel. Charles knew Issacharoff from earlier meetings, in which they discussed the political dynamics in the Gulf region. Suwaidi was already planning to visit Washington, and Charles arranged for him to meet with Issacharoff at a private office. "This was all done off the record, unofficially," a former official recalled, so that the Israelis and the Emiratis could say, "The meeting never happened." It wasn't a one-off encounter. Israeli and Emirati officials didn't agree on the Palestinian issue, but they shared a perspective on the emerging Iranian threat, which was becoming a bigger priority for leaders in both countries. Later, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin told the Clinton Administration that he would not object to the F-16 sale. Former U.S. officials said that the Israeli decision built a sense of trust between Israel and the U.A.E.

M.B.Z. wanted to modernize his small military so that it could defend itself against Iran and other threats. During the negotiations, he learned that the F-16s would contain Israeli technology. Some Arab leaders would have rejected such a deal. M.B.Z. didn't care. "The Emiratis wanted everything the Israelis had," a former Clinton Administration official who was involved in the negotiations said.

With M.B.Z.'s blessing, Suwaidi started bringing delegations of influen-



tial American Jews to Abu Dhabi to meet with Emirati officials. A senior Emirati leader attended one of the first sessions, more than twenty years ago, according to a former American official, who recalled him saying something that shocked the Jewish leaders in the room: "I can envision us being in the trenches with Israel fighting against Iran." They assumed that he was telling them what he thought they wanted to hear, but the official said that, for Emirati leaders like M.B.Z., "it's the old adage: the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

From those preliminary contacts and others, an intelligence-sharing relationship emerged, U.S. officials said. For the Israelis, this was a long-term investment; the prize, they hoped, would be a normalization of relations.

Soon after Obama's Inauguration in 2009, the Israeli and Emirati governments joined forces for the first time to press the new Administration to take seriously the Iranian threat. Otaiba and Sallai Meridor, who was then Israel's Ambassador to the United States, asked Dennis Ross, the Middle East adviser, to meet with them at a Georgetown hotel, where they made their joint appeal. Obama's willingness to talk to the Iranian leadership to find ways to reduce tensions unnerved officials in Israel and the U.A.E. They thought that a joint presentation would send a stronger message than if the two governments voiced their concerns independently. The meeting, according to a former U.S. official, demonstrated "a level of cooperation that was real and practical," and went far beyond intelligence sharing. A senior Arab official said, "It was designed to get their attention. If we sit together, and tell them the same thing, they're going to take it seriously." The joint effort surprised Obama's advisers, but didn't deter the President from pursuing negotiations with Tehran.

In May, 2009, during a series of meetings in Washington that were dominated by disagreements over the settlements, Netanyahu tried to get Obama and his team to focus on easing Israel's isolation in the region. According to a senior American official who was present, Netanyahu asked Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to convince Gulf

leaders to meet with him publicly. If the Arabs agreed, Netanyahu told Clinton, "it would show the people of Israel that there might be some benefit for Israel from the normalization of relations," the American official said.

A few weeks later, Obama flew to Riyadh to meet with King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who had, in 2002, proposed broad Arab recognition of Israel in return for a withdrawal from all territory occupied since 1967. Obama suggested that Abdullah's proposal, known as the Arab Peace Initiative, might revive talks among the Israelis, the Palestinians, and Arab countries, only two of which, Egypt and Jordan, recognized the Jewish state. When Obama asked Abdullah if he would meet publicly with Netanyahu, the King responded categorically. "Impossible," he said, according to an American official briefed on the meeting. Abdullah said that a settlement freeze wasn't enough. He needed a final peace agreement. Then he said, to Obama's surprise, "We'll be the last ones to make peace with them."

Michael Oren, Israel's Ambassador to the U.S. from 2009 to 2013, told me at a coffee shop in Tel Aviv that he'd encountered "three types" of Arab ambassadors in Washington: "those who would have lunch with me openly, those who would have lunch with me secretly, and those who wouldn't have lunch with me." Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the United States at the time, Adel al-Jubeir, shunned Oren, in keeping with the harder line taken by King Abdullah. When Oren saw Jubeir at events around Washington, Jubeir would "look right through me, as if I was made of glass," Oren recalled.

During a temporary setback in the secret intelligence relationship (caused by a Mossad operation in Dubai in 2010), the U.A.E. made a proposal to patch things up: Israel would supply Emirati forces with armed drones, according to U.S. and Arab officials. The Israelis balked at the idea, wary of antagonizing the Obama Administration, which had refused to sell armed drones to the U.A.E.

John Kerry, Clinton's successor at the State Department, had tried to restart peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, but, when the negotiations collapsed, in 2014, Netanyahu asked Isaac Molho, one of his most trusted advisers, to concentrate on fostering political contacts with Arab states. Netanyahu wanted to move relations with the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia beyond the secret channels.

King Abdullah died in January, 2015, at the age of ninety, making way for other Saudi leaders, including the twenty-nine-year-old Mohammad bin Salman, who later became crown prince. M.B.S., as he is known, shared M.B.Z.'s views on Iran and a less ideological approach to the Jewish state. In meetings with American officials in Riyadh and Washington, M.B.S. routinely remarked that "Israel's never attacked us," and "we share a common enemy." He privately said that he was prepared to have a full relationship with Israel. Like M.B.Z., M.B.S., in conversations with U.S. officials and Jewish-American groups, expressed disdain for the Palestinian leadership. He, too, seemed eager for that conflict to be finished, even if it meant the Palestinians were dissatisfied with the terms.

Dermer briefed Otaiba on Israel's position on the Iran deal and tried to convince him to join the Israelis in actively opposing Obama. While the Israelis mounted a public campaign, the Emiratis, who lack political clout in the United States outside of Washington, largely voiced their concerns in private. In early 2015, Netanyahu accepted an invitation from John Boehner, the Republican Speaker of the House, and delivered a fiery speech before a joint session of Congress, arguing, "This is a bad deal—a very bad deal." The speech failed to persuade Congress to block the agreement, yet a senior Israeli official said that it led to an increase in Israeli-Gulf Arab contacts.

For years, American officials were skeptical of Israel's claims about its ability to expand ties with the Gulf states. But, toward the end of Obama's second term, U.S. intelligence agencies



learned of phone calls between senior U.A.E. and Israeli officials, including calls between a senior Emirati leader and Netanyahu. Then U.S. intelligence agencies picked up on a secret meeting between senior U.A.E. and Israeli leaders in Cyprus. U.S. officials suspect that Netanyahu attended the meeting, which centered on countering Obama's Iran deal. The Israelis and the Emiratis didn't inform the Obama Administration of their discussions. "They were not telling the truth," a former State Department official told me. "It's one thing to be secret from the public. It's another thing to be secret from the U.S., supposedly the closest ally of both." Neither Dermer nor Otaiba would confirm that the meeting took place.

"Obama set out to bring Jews and Arabs closer together through peace," Oren told me. "He succeeded through common opposition to his Iran policy."

By 2015, Netanyahu no longer cared what Obama thought of him. The Obama era was ending and, along with M.B.Z., Netanyahu had set his sights on persuading the new President to create an entirely new dynamic in the Middle East. Donald Trump was unschooled in the intricacies of policy, domestic and foreign, but he did pay attention to personalities. He'd long

admired Netanyahu's swagger and oratorical skills, his insistence on projecting himself as a great historical actor, and his willingness to challenge Obama. In early January, 2013, Jonny Daniels, an Israeli public-relations man, asked Trump if he would be interested in recording a video message endorsing Netanyahu in the upcoming Israeli elections. Trump agreed, and shot the video at Trump Tower.

"My name is Donald Trump and I'm a big fan of Israel," he said to the camera. "And, frankly, a strong Prime Minister is a strong Israel. And you truly have a great Prime Minister in Benjamin Netanyahu. There's nobody like him. He's a winner. He's highly respected. He's highly thought of by all. And people really do have great, great respect for what's happened in Israel. So vote for Benjamin. Terrific guy. Terrific leader. Great for Israel."

Trump boasted afterward that Netanyahu personally solicited his help. "I was called by Bibi and his people," he told an interviewer for Shalom TV's "In the News" program, "and they asked me whether or not I'd do an ad or a statement, and I said 'Absolutely.'" In fact, no one in the Israeli leadership had solicited Trump's help.

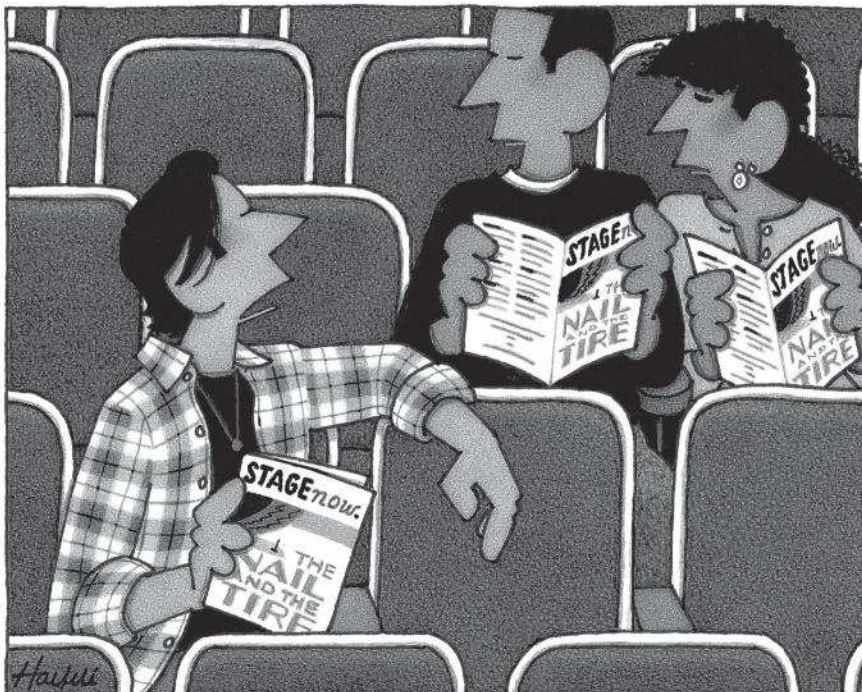
The Israelis were not sure at first whether to take Trump's candidacy se-

riously. Despite Jared Kushner's role as an intermediary, Trump's relationship with Netanyahu during the campaign got off to a rough start. At a campaign rally in Manassas, Virginia, on December 2, 2015, Trump said, "Very soon I'm going to Israel and I'll be meeting with Bibi Netanyahu." Kushner had been laying the groundwork for his father-in-law to fly to Israel for a meeting with the Prime Minister, tentatively scheduled for later that month.

The plan was disrupted a few days later, when Trump called for a "total and complete shutdown" of the entry of Muslims into the United States. His comments echoed a divisive moment in Israeli politics nine months earlier, when Netanyahu, in the last days of his reelection campaign, warned that Arab voters were going to the polls in "droves." Netanyahu had been sharply criticized, so, when Trump's announcement sparked a political backlash within Israel, Netanyahu's office issued a statement saying, "Prime Minister Netanyahu rejects Donald Trump's recent remarks about Muslims." Trump took the criticism "badly," according to a friend of Kushner's. Trump wrote, on Twitter, "I have decided to postpone my trip to Israel and to schedule my meeting with @Netanyahu at a later date after I become President of the U.S."

After being accused of trying to help the Romney campaign, in 2012, Netanyahu and Dermer knew that they had to proceed with caution during the 2016 race. In January, 2016, Michèle Flournoy, who was considered the front-runner to lead the Pentagon in a Hillary Clinton Administration, visited Israel to attend an annual security conference, and met there with Moshe Ya'alon, Netanyahu's Minister of Defense. Flournoy told Ya'alon that the strong bipartisan support for the U.S.-Israel relationship was in peril. "Netanyahu has been weighing in so brazenly in our politics and making it very clear that he prefers a Republican counterpart," she recalled telling him. "When an Israeli administration starts to cultivate or prefer one American party over the other, you're playing with fire."

Democratic lawmakers and Jewish-American leaders delivered similar



*"I set a limit: one pity play per actor friend per year."*



warnings. The Prime Minister decided not to attend the annual AIPAC conference in Washington, in March, thus avoiding face-to-face encounters with the various candidates. But, as the campaign went on, Dermer spoke regularly with Kushner and even got some of his talking points included in Trump's first major policy speech on Israel.

Meanwhile, other Israeli diplomats tried to develop less official connections to a possible Trump Administration. One of these was through George Papadopoulos, a young energy consultant based in London, who had met Israeli diplomats at a conference about oil and gas operations in the eastern Mediterranean. When, in March, 2016, Papadopoulos joined the Trump campaign as a foreign-policy adviser, he shared the news with his Israeli contacts. One of the Israeli diplomats met with Papadopoulos and discussed Trump's foreign-policy priorities, which he passed on to his colleagues in Jerusalem. The Israeli diplomat helped Papadopoulos contact an official at the Australian Embassy, who set up a meeting over drinks between Papadopoulos and Alexander Downer, Australia's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom. Papadopoulos told Downer that he had heard that Moscow had "dirt" on Clinton, in the form of thousands of e-mails. F.B.I. agents later found out about Downer's conversation with Papadopoulos, which became part of the F.B.I.'s early rationale for launching an investigation into whether Trump or his associates conspired with Moscow during the 2016 campaign.

American officials soon learned of the activity between Israel and the Trump team. Other governments took a Clinton victory as a foregone conclusion, but a former U.S. official told me, "The Israelis didn't take that opinion at all. They were working the Trump people with great energy before anybody else was engaged with them."

The Israelis knew the Trump team from the inside. By the end of the campaign, according to the former U.S. official, the Israelis "had a clear understanding" of who Kushner and Trump's other Middle East advisers were, where they stood on policy matters, and how little they knew about the issues, par-

ticularly the Palestinian question. The former official said that the Israelis "had that all mapped out" and were confident they would be able to advance their priorities. Netanyahu's main focus was scrapping the Iran nuclear deal and steering the U.S. toward a more confrontational stance against Tehran. Lower down on Netanyahu's wish list was moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a particular obsession of Trump's and the Prime Minister's most right-wing supporters.

In late September, 2016, seven weeks before the election, Netanyahu attended the annual gathering of the U.N. General Assembly. Kushner proposed to Dermer that Netanyahu meet with Trump during his visit, in the belief that such a visible event would help to energize evangelical-Christian voters, and make his father-in-law look more Presidential. Kushner jokingly told Trump that he believed Netanyahu was one of the only politicians who could have challenged him in a race for the Republican Party's nomination; Netanyahu was that popular with evangelical Christians. Dermer said the meeting was an important way to establish a "strong personal rapport" between the leaders and to smooth over any previous misunderstandings.

Trump was initially hesitant. "These are two pure alpha males," a former Trump adviser told me. "Trump has a powerful personality and a massive physical presence. And Bibi has a commanding presence coupled with immense intellectual firepower that lets him drive the narrative." The adviser said he thought that Trump might have felt intimidated about meeting with Netanyahu, adding, "He didn't know if Bibi respected him." In the end, Trump agreed, and Netanyahu used his time with Trump to create a bond with him and to press his strategic agenda.

Netanyahu saw Clinton, too. He wanted to sell whoever became the next President on what he saw as a historic opportunity to fashion an anti-Iran alliance. One of Clinton's aides said that Netanyahu outlined a plan calling for the Arab states to take steps toward recognizing Israel, in exchange for Israel improving the lives of the Palestinians. Later, after a series of

confidence-building trades, the Arab states would pressure the Palestinians to accept a full deal with the Israelis—one that was likely to be substantially less advantageous to the Palestinians than what they had rejected in previous negotiations.

Clinton knew that the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia were already working together behind the scenes with Moscow to counter Iranian influence. Netanyahu made it clear to Clinton that he wanted the next President's support in strengthening those secret relationships and eventually moving them into the open. The regional dynamics had changed since Clinton left the State Department, but she knew that Netanyahu's approach would be harder to execute than he made it sound.

Netanyahu and Dermer made a similar pitch about the "regional opportunities" to Trump, Kushner, and Bannon in the candidate's penthouse in Trump Tower. The task of persuading them was easier, at least in part because they had so little experience with the long, tortured history of the region and had yet to formulate a detailed strategy of their own. Bannon was "blown away" by the idea of an alliance between Israel and the Gulf states. A former Trump adviser told me that Dermer and Netanyahu "had thought this through—this wasn't half-baked. This was well articulated, and it dovetailed exactly with our thinking." The adviser credited Netanyahu and Dermer with inspiring the new Administration's approach to the Middle East. "The germ of the idea started in that room . . . on September 25, 2016, in Trump's penthouse." A friend of Trump's compared the candidate's team to a "blank canvas": "Israel just had their way with us."

M.B.Z. was equally determined to get an early foothold with Trump. On December 15, 2016, five weeks after the election, he flew to New York to see Kushner, Bannon, and Flynn. They met discreetly at the Four Seasons Hotel, instead of at Trump Tower, where there were always reporters in the lobby. (The Obama White House was tipped off about the visit when Emirati officials provided Customs and Border Protection agents in Abu Dhabi with

a flight manifest that listed M.B.Z.'s name.) M.B.Z. wanted Trump's advisers to know that he and his counterpart in Saudi Arabia, M.B.S., were committed to working with the new Administration to roll back Iran's influence. Participants in the meeting said that M.B.Z.'s message—that Iran was the problem, not Israel—coincided with Netanyahu's view. Later, according to people familiar with the exchange, Bannon told Otaiba, "That was one of the most eye-opening meetings I've ever had."

While M.B.Z. and M.B.S. made it clear to Trump's advisers that Iran was their most urgent priority, they said that progress toward ending the Palestinian conflict was mandatory for them to have a more open relationship with Israel. By May, 2017, when Trump met with Arab leaders in Riyadh, Kushner and M.B.S. had agreed on the outlines of what they called a Middle East strategic alliance. Israel would, for now, remain a "silent partner." The U.S. committed to taking a harder line on Iran. And the Gulf Arabs promised to help get the Palestinians to go along with the new program. M.B.S. described to an American visitor the division of labor. "We're going to get the deal done," M.B.S. said. "I'm going to deliver the Palestinians and he"—Trump—"is going to deliver the Israelis."

M.B.Z., M.B.S., and Netanyahu were similarly aligned when it came to Russia, whose presence in the region couldn't be ignored. In recent years, the Emiratis and the Saudis sought to pull Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, out of Iran's orbit by investing billions of dollars in the Russian economy. An even more critical reason for Netanyahu to curry Putin's favor was to insure that the Israeli military could fly in Syrian airspace, which was partly controlled by Russia, to carry out operations without ending up in a conflict with Moscow. Netanyahu understood that Putin could be the key to getting Iran to eventually withdraw its forces from Syria, an objective shared by Trump and his team. At the White House, in the winter of 2017, Bannon questioned a State Department official about what it would take to get Putin to break off Russia's alliance with the Iranian lead-

ership. The former Trump adviser told me that the Administration and its closest Middle East allies didn't want Moscow to be on Iran's side in any future conflict. Trump initially tried to ease tensions with Putin, but those efforts only fuelled questions about his motivations, given Russia's meddling on his behalf during the 2016 campaign. U.S. lawmakers and European allies gradually prevailed on Trump to take a harder line.

M.B.Z., who was in many ways the most pivotal Arab player in this strategic drama, has long been surrounded by a shadowy network of part-time advisers, fixers, and confidants, many of whom shared his hatred of Iran's rulers. Word spread in M.B.Z.'s circle, in late 2016 and early 2017, that a new campaign to counter Iran was in the works. Some of the crown prince's advisers were eager to offer their advice and services. Just before Trump's Inauguration, an M.B.Z. adviser named George Nader helped arrange a meeting, at the crown prince's resort in the Seychelles, between the Blackwater founder Erik Prince—a Bannon ally, and the brother of Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education—and Kirill Dmitriev, who ran Russia's sovereign wealth fund and was close to Putin. Later, disorder in the Trump White House created openings for M.B.Z.'s and Bannon's associates to pitch ideas to increase pressure on Tehran. This play for contracts, influence, and status has attracted the attention of Robert Mueller. According to a former U.S. official, one would-be contractor who is close to the Emiratis, the Saudis, and the Israelis presented a plan to use cyberweapons planted inside Iran's critical infrastructure, including its stock market, to wreak economic havoc and sow political discord. It remains unclear whether he was freelancing or making pitches on behalf of Emirati, Saudi, and Israeli leaders.

Netanyahu also wanted to cash in on the new Administration's enthusiasm for creating a Middle East strategic alliance against Iran. Israeli officials pressed Trump's advisers to arrange a White House "summit" that Netanyahu, M.B.Z., M.B.S., and other Arab leaders would attend. When the Americans floated the idea with the Saudi

and the Emirati leadership, the response was negative, a senior Arab official told me. Just as Obama and his first Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, learned in 2009, and John Kerry discovered later, it wouldn't be easy to get Gulf Arab leaders to meet in public with Netanyahu, despite the convergence of interests in recent years. Israeli officials backed off the idea, telling their American counterparts that Netanyahu understood M.B.Z.'s and M.B.S.'s concerns. The Gulf leaders represented Israel's best hope in generations for securing acceptance in the region. The last thing the Prime Minister wanted was for a mere photo op to spark a popular revolt against them.

Barack Obama had come into office hoping to achieve what his predecessors could not: a reconciliation between the Israelis and the Palestinians. As a young politician in Chicago, he had numerous Jewish friends and supporters; his local coalition depended largely on African-Americans on the South Side and left-leaning Jews farther north. Within Israel, he was drawn to a political culture exemplified by the liberal readers of *Haaretz*, who lived in Tel Aviv and Haifa, voted Labor or Meretz, and admired the novels of David Grossman and Amos Oz. Recently, in a speech at Temple Emanu-El, in New York, Obama said that he was "basically a liberal Jew." Like most Democrats, he easily won the Jewish vote, in both 2008 and 2012. But his Jewish supporters were generally centrists and liberals. For many of them, Israel was not a primary issue.

Trump's Jewish supporters were more religious, mostly aligned with Likud and its right-wing coalition partners. These Jews are only a minority of the roughly six million who live in the United States, but they tend to be more focussed on issues pertaining to Israel, and are, in some cases, willing to spend a great deal of money to influence U.S. policy. Trump's advisers, in searching for a high-profile advocate, homed in on a pro-Likud billionaire: the Las Vegas-based casino mogul Sheldon Adelson.

In December, 2015, Trump spoke at an event in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the Republican Jewish Coalition.



Adelson helps to fund the group, and he owns a popular tabloid in Israel called *Israel Hayom*, which has long served as a loyal tribune for Netanyahu. He takes a particularly derisive view of the Palestinians, believing that establishing a state for them would be “a stepping stone for the destruction of Israel and the Jewish people.” One of *Israel Hayom*’s early targets was Ehud Olmert, the Israeli Prime Minister between 2006 and 2009. Adelson wanted Olmert “disposed of” for his efforts to negotiate a two-state agreement with the Palestinians, Olmert told me. After Olmert’s ouster, Adelson turned his attention to electing Netanyahu. “Sheldon didn’t work for Bibi. Bibi worked for Sheldon,” Olmert said.

Adelson exerts almost as much influence on electoral politics in the U.S. as he does in Israel. No Republican candidate can easily afford to ignore him. Adelson considered Obama an enemy of Israel, and, in the 2012 election, he and his wife, Miriam, contributed at least ninety-three million dollars to groups supporting the G.O.P. Officials in the U.S. and Israel said that they learned from American Jewish leaders that Adelson had vowed to spend “whatever it takes” to prevent Obama from securing a peace agreement while in office.

At the event in Washington, staunch Republican supporters of Likud found Trump’s performance unsettling. In his opening remarks, Trump attacked Jeb Bush, saying that he was “controlled totally” by donors who gave large sums of money to his campaign. “You want to control your own politician, that’s fine,” Trump told the group. “I don’t want your money.” During a brief question-and-answer session, Matthew Brooks, the executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, asked Trump how he would approach negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Trump cast himself as a neutral party, interested in getting the Israelis and the Palestinians what they needed to end the conflict. “People are going to have to make sacrifices, one way or the other,” he said.

Brooks pressed Trump. “Can I, at least, try to pin you down on Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel? Is that a position you support?” he asked.



“Shoes off?”

Trump equivocated: “I want to wait until I meet with Bibi.”

Boos erupted from the audience. “Who’s the wise guy?” Trump snapped. “You can’t go in with that attitude. . . . You got to go in, and get it, and do it, and do it nicely, so everyone’s happy. Don’t worry about it. You’re going to be very happy.”

A couple of weeks later, Trump took part in a primary debate at the Venetian Hotel, in Las Vegas, part of Adelson’s casino empire. Early in the campaign, Adelson considered Trump to be little more than a braggart. Trump and Adelson met in Las Vegas, and then again in New York. Trump and his advisers thought that Adelson would back Marco Rubio; their objective in the New York meeting was to caution Adelson. A senior Trump Administration official said that the campaign’s message to Adelson was simple: “You’re going to waste a lot of money if you’re going to go against us. You’re only going to help the Democrats.”

In May, 2016, after it became clear that Trump was going to win the nomination, Adelson endorsed him, but he informed the campaign that he wanted a commitment to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. For many years, Palestinian, Israeli, and American negotiators had discussed a

Palestinian state that would have as its capital at least some part of East Jerusalem. Adelson wanted to take the issue of dividing the capital “off the table.” A Trump confidant said, “That was the sole issue for him. It was his dream.”

A few weeks after the party Conventions in the summer of 2016, Trump dipped in the national polls. His campaign was concerned that the Republican establishment would withdraw its support, and, in mid-August, Adelson met with Trump, Kushner, and Bannon in New York. Adelson asked again about moving the Embassy. “We have to win this,” Bannon said at the meeting, according to someone familiar with the exchange. “If we don’t, forget about moving the Embassy.” Later, Adelson told associates that he had received a commitment that Trump would, if elected, announce the Embassy move on his first day in office. Soon after the meeting, Sheldon and Miriam Adelson started writing checks to back the campaign.

Adelson’s support, one of Trump’s senior aides said, was evidence that “the legit part of the Republican establishment was coming in big” behind Trump. “Within ten days or fifteen days, we basically secured legitimate Republican muscle. Adelson was critical.”

After Trump’s victory, Bannon began drafting his “Day One” project,

a list of executive actions that Trump intended to take as soon as the swearing-in ceremony was over. At the top of the list was an executive order moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem.

The Adelsons visited Trump Tower, and spoke of the victory as a “miracle.” When Trump mentioned how he looked forward to moving the Embassy, Miriam wept with joy. Adelson told Trump, “Everything else you do, a thousand years from now, you’ll be remembered for this.”

But after James Mattis and Rex Tillerson, his nominees for Defense Secretary and Secretary of State, urged caution, Trump decided to defer the move. The Trump confidant said that Adelson was caught off guard. As the weeks passed without an announcement, Adelson started to complain. “You’re making a fool of me!” he shouted on the phone to a senior White House aide. Eventually, Adelson and others pressured Trump to stop delaying by warning him that he risked losing support among evangelical Christians.

Despite the argument over the timing of the Embassy move, Trump showed every sign of being not merely pro-Israel but pro-Likud. Netanyahu now had the latitude to do as he wished regarding the Palestinian question, Israeli officials told me. Denunciations from the White House, and calls for restraint during flareups of violence in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, would be things of the past. Two days after being sworn in, Trump had a phone call with Netanyahu. When the Prime Minister got off the line, he could barely contain his excitement. “I saw the body language,” one of his aides told me. “He was like a small child who got the best birthday present he could ever imagine.”

Trump was convinced, he told friends, that he was uniquely suited to brokering the “ultimate deal.” In private conversations, he expressed general support for a two-state solution. Since taking office, he has said publicly that he would favor whatever solution the two sides were able to agree on. Trump decided to put Kushner in charge of the Israeli-Palestinian issue without asking him in advance whether he wanted

the assignment. A senior Trump Administration official said that Trump’s decision made sense, because Gulf Arab leaders ran their countries like family businesses and would naturally feel more comfortable dealing with a member of Trump’s family.

Trump tried to cast himself as an honest broker who was “right down the middle,” but his advisers—Kushner, David Friedman, and Jason Greenblatt—couldn’t be more aligned with Netanyahu if he had chosen them himself. Before Friedman assumed his post as Ambassador to Israel, experts from the State Department briefed him on the dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. At the end of the presentation, according to one attendee, Friedman said, “I just don’t understand. The people who live there are basically Egyptians. Why can’t Egypt take them back?” One of the briefers explained to Friedman that two-thirds of the residents of Gaza were refugees, or descended from refugees, from what is now Israel proper. (Friedman denies saying this.) Friedman had also written an op-ed in which he called J Street, a liberal, pro-Israel political-action committee, “far worse than kapos—Jews who turned in their fellow Jews in the Nazi death camps.” J Street’s supporters, he wrote, were “just smug advocates of Israel’s destruction delivered from the comfort of their secure American sofas—it’s hard to imagine anyone worse.” Five previous U.S. Ambassadors to Israel signed a letter saying that Friedman was unqualified for the job. Netanyahu has been delighted with the appointment. He knew that Israel would never be dealt a more sympathetic hand; that Kushner was unlikely to ask him to do anything that he thought wouldn’t be in Netanyahu’s best interest. On the other hand, could Netanyahu say no to Trump and Kushner if and when, down the road, they asked him for real sacrifices for the sake of getting the “ultimate deal”?

The tensions and the general chaos in the White House sometimes affected the relationship between the Israelis and the Trump Administration. On February 13, 2017, the day that Michael Flynn was forced out as national-

security adviser, Ron Dermer went to the White House to try to arrange for Trump to sign secret documents, as other Presidents had done, which the Israelis saw as an American commitment not to ask them to give up their undeclared nuclear arsenal. He asked to meet privately with Flynn. Aides told Dermer that he could not dictate whom he wanted to meet with. (It turned out that Flynn had urgent business to attend to: writing his resignation letter.) Later, White House officials commiserated over what they saw as Dermer’s heavy-handed tactics. “This is our fuckin’ house,” one of them said. The feeling in the White House, a former adviser there told me, was “There is a lot of good will, but don’t take advantage of us.”

At one point, in front of witnesses, Kushner swore at Dermer in his West Wing office, saying he wasn’t going to do his bidding just because of his Jewish background. “You’re not going to tell us how to run these things,” he told Dermer. “Don’t try to push us around. Don’t try to jam us.” When I asked Dermer about the incident, he didn’t remember Kushner using that language, and said, “I have a very good relationship with Jared, but we don’t always agree on everything.”

After one of Trump’s oldest friends told him that he didn’t believe Netanyahu wanted to make a deal, the President began asking whether Netanyahu was only pretending to be committed, just as Obama and his advisers had concluded. U.S. officials say that Netanyahu, in turn, may worry that Trump, who is famously unpredictable, will surprise him with demands. Unlike Obama, Trump is popular in Israel, and Netanyahu knows that it will now be harder for him to reject White House proposals.

As a senior adviser, Kushner had access to sensitive intelligence reports, including those prepared by the National Security Agency. Many of his interlocutors were N.S.A. targets, and this allowed him and others to see what they were saying about the new White House team. At times, Kushner and other White House officials talked about the “chatter,” and how foreign government officials, including the Israelis, the Emiratis, and the Saudis,



could try to “manipulate or take advantage” of Kushner. “He was being told that that’s what’s going on,” a former White House official said.

Bill Priestap, the assistant director of the Counterintelligence Division at the F.B.I., briefed Kushner on the counterintelligence threats he faced. Some foreign powers saw Kushner as susceptible to persuasion—and, because of his family's myriad business pursuits around the world, particularly prone to conflicts of interest. In the briefing, Priestap told Kushner that his father-in-law was the No. 1 target of every major foreign intelligence service in the world. He said that Kushner probably ranked in the top five. One of the countries Priestap told Kushner he needed to watch out for was Israel. Kushner said he wasn't surprised.

To prepare for his new role as an international diplomat and peacemaker, Kushner read past peace agreements, including the 1993 Oslo Accords. He thought they were full of high-flown ideals but short on specifics. He told aides that the documents said “as little as possible” to “offend as few people as possible.” Kushner’s plan was to propose a deal that was highly detailed, and then sell it.

One of the biggest differences between the Obama and Trump Administrations on Middle East policy was their approach to, and understanding of, the Palestinian question. Kushner told aides that he thought Obama “tried to beat up on Israel and give the Palestinians everything.” This was a common view on the right. Trump’s advisers, by contrast, wanted the Palestinians to think that their stock value was declining—a strategy advocated by Netanyahu and Dermer. The goal was to get the Palestinian leadership to accept more “realistic” proposals than had been offered to them by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, in 2000, and by Ehud Olmert, in 2008. Never mind that, in the Palestinian view, the Oslo-era notion of a state included only a fraction of the territory of historical Palestine. One senior Trump Administration official used the price of stock as an analogy: “Like in life—Oh, I wish I bought

Google twenty years ago. Now I can't. I have to pay this amount of money. It's not that I'm being punished. I just missed the opportunity." Privately, David Friedman compared the Trump Administration's approach to structuring a "bankruptcy-type deal" for the Palestinians. Friedman, in fact, spent much of his professional life structuring bankruptcy deals—for Trump, among other clients.

Israeli intelligence officials say that Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, feels more isolated than ever. In the past, support from Arab states gave the Palestinians the confidence to resist U.S. and Israeli pressure to soften their demands. That backing has always been contingent, but it now seems more precarious. Successive U.S. Administrations have underestimated Abbas's willingness to stand up to outside pressure. A friend of Abbas's said that Abbas would rather die than give in.

Obama once described his guiding principle of foreign policy as “Don’t do stupid shit.” In contrast, Trump revels in taking big gambles in foreign policy—North Korea, Iran, the Middle East, Europe, Mexico. Like Richard Nixon, he appears to take pride in throwing his rivals off guard with erratic behavior and rhetoric. The Trump team seems unfazed by the feeling

among Palestinians that they are being cast aside.

“It was an important strategic decision by the President to take this on in his first year,” the senior Trump Administration official told me. He and other officials believe that if the Palestinians alienate Trump now, then they risk “three to seven years of bad relations” with a critical aid donor. The two million residents of Gaza live in particularly dismal conditions. Two-thirds of Gazans depend on humanitarian aid and other services provided by an organization called U.N.R.W.A. (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East).

Earlier this year, Trump, in an apparent effort to increase pressure on Abbas, froze U.S. financial support for the agency. U.N. officials have repeatedly warned that they could be forced to shutter the territory's schools or even curtail food aid. Nevertheless, Kushner seemed to conclude that the U.N. agency was bluffing. In a recent e-mail to Greenblatt, Friedman, and other officials, Kushner wrote, "UNRWA has been threatening us for 6 months that if they don't get a check they will close schools. Nothing has happened."

In the same e-mail, Kushner boasted,



*"Ha-ha, you should see the other guy! And by that I mean, have you seen the other guy? He's very big, has my bag, and just beat me in a bar fight."*



“We have made some big moves and everyone in the region is on their toes which is where they need to be for real change. Our goal can’t be to keep things stable and as they are, our goal has to be to make things significantly BETTER! Sometimes you have to strategically risk breaking things in order to get there.”

The Palestinian leadership had been suffering long before Trump came into office. Divided, exhausted, and deeply distrustful of the Netanyahu government, the Palestinians knew they were no longer a center of world attention. During the transition, Saeb Erekat, a Palestinian negotiator who had worked on the Oslo Accords, travelled to Washington for meetings with members of the outgoing Administration. Susan Rice asked him if he had any contacts on the Trump transition team. He said that he did not. “You’re here and you’re not going to meet with any of them?” Rice asked, according to Erekat. He responded to Rice by saying, “I don’t know any of them. I don’t know how to contact any of them. I don’t know if they will touch me.” Before Erekat left the Obama White House for the last time, Rice told him, “You’re going to miss us.”

One of the few people in Trump’s circle who argued for engaging seriously with the Palestinians was Ron-

ald Lauder, a wealthy businessman and the head of the World Jewish Congress. After the Inauguration, Trump met with Lauder and mentioned that he wanted to call Mahmoud Abbas, to see if he wanted a deal. “I think he’s going to be somebody who you can work with,” Lauder told Trump.

Obama had called Abbas almost immediately after being sworn in. Trump waited nearly two months. On March 10, 2017, a White House operator put Abbas on the line with the President.

Trump quickly got to the point. “What do you think?” he asked Abbas. “Can we do a peace deal?” Abbas didn’t answer Trump’s question directly. First, he hailed the “great democratic results” of the American election.

“O.K.,” Trump interrupted, telling Abbas the phone connection wasn’t clear. “We are talking about a historic peace deal,” Trump repeated. “What do you think?”

Abbas said, “We believe that through negotiations we can achieve peace with the Israelis,” adding that he was “ready to talk to Mr. Netanyahu in order to start negotiations.”

“Oh, that’s very good,” Trump said.

Trump then took Abbas and his close advisers by surprise. “Do you think Bibi wants to make a deal?” Trump asked. “What is your opinion?” The

question astonished Abbas. No American President had ever asked him to assess the intentions of an Israeli Prime Minister. Trump repeated the question. Abbas responded cautiously: “He is the Prime Minister of Israel. We don’t have any other option.” Trump concurred: “You don’t have an option.”

Then Trump told Abbas there was an opportunity for a deal “because of me.” Describing himself as a neutral party, Trump promised to “give it my one-hundred-per-cent efforts,” and predicted, “It’s going to happen.” Abbas seemed swayed by Trump’s salesmanship, or at least he decided that it was best to sound encouraged. “We count on you, Mr. President,” Abbas said. “We believe you can do it.”

The next challenge facing Abbas was a meeting with Trump on May 3, 2017, in the Oval Office. The meeting took a contentious turn when Trump asked about the Palestinian Authority’s practice of giving money to the families of prisoners in Israeli jails and the families of terrorists. According to Erekat, Abbas told the Americans that the Palestinians had been engaged in a long conflict with Israel, and that “we take care of the families of the martyrs.” After the meeting, Trump hosted a lunch for Abbas, but Bannon refused to attend. He told me that he wouldn’t “eat with someone with innocent Jewish blood on his hands.”

Later that month, Trump, after his trip to Riyadh, called on Netanyahu in Jerusalem. There, the Prime Minister showed him a video with excerpts of speeches by Abbas in which, according to the Israeli government’s translations, he incited violence. Soon afterward, Trump travelled to Bethlehem and confronted Abbas about the video, suggesting that he was trying to trick the new Administration into thinking that he was committed to peace, U.S. officials said. The Palestinians accused Netanyahu of obstructing the peace process, prompting Trump to change the subject. Erekat told me later that Netanyahu was using “every trick in the book” to convince Trump that Abbas wasn’t trustworthy.

Kushner’s encounters with Erekat were especially combative. In one of them, Erekat complained that the Palestinians were having trouble organiz-



ing meetings with the Israelis. Kushner explained, “We told them they shouldn’t meet with you now.” Erekat said that didn’t make any sense: “It’s much better for us to meet with the Israelis. . . . You’re not going to make peace for us.”

Kushner held his ground. “You think all of a sudden you’re going to meet at your house, and have tea, and you’ll be able to agree on something you haven’t been able to agree on for twenty-five years?” Kushner said. He felt that the Palestinians were giving him a “history lesson on every single issue.” He told them, “That’s all in the past. . . . Show me what you think is an outcome that you can live with.” Erekat was furious. He characterized the Trump team’s treatment of him as “If I don’t take thirty cents on the dollar now, I’ll get fifteen cents next year.”

In one exchange, Erekat told Kushner that he felt like he was dealing with “real-estate agents” instead of White House officials. Kushner responded by saying, “Saeb, you haven’t made peace with politicians. Maybe you need a real-estate agent.”

Erekat had another contentious meeting with Kushner at the end of November, 2017, in which he warned him that if Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel “you will have disqualified yourselves from playing any role in the peace process.” Kushner replied, “We’re a sovereign nation. . . . Don’t threaten us.” Erekat said he was simply telling him that “you are destroying the two-state solution.”

Trump’s last phone conversation with Abbas took place just before the announcement of his decision to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The phone connection to Abbas kept dropping, frustrating Trump, who knew that Abbas would be upset when he heard what he had to say. Finally, the operator told Trump that Abbas was on the line. Trump told Abbas that he was keeping his campaign promise to move the Embassy. Trump then launched into an impromptu monologue. One former aide described it as “heartfelt.” Trump told Abbas that he was committed to getting the Palestinians the best possible deal and that Israel would make

real concessions that he would be happy with if he stayed engaged. He added that Abbas would get a “better” deal under his Administration than under Obama’s, a line he repeated more than once. Trump finished his monologue after about fifteen minutes, and then paused to let Abbas respond. All he heard was silence. Exasperated, Trump asked the operator what was going on. The connection with Abbas had dropped, the operator told Trump. How long was Abbas on the call? Trump asked. The operator said he didn’t know and asked the President if he wanted him to try to connect the call again. Trump said he might try later.

On December 6th, Trump announced his decision to move the Embassy. “While previous Presidents have made this a major campaign promise, they failed to deliver,” he said. “Today, I am delivering.” Abbas soon pulled out of the talks. The public reaction from Arab capitals was noticeably mild. Still, Gulf Arab leaders privately told Kushner that the decision was counterproductive. Before the Jerusalem decision, Arab leaders had told Kushner that they were prepared to pressure Abbas to accept whatever Trump offered the Palestinians, a senior Arab official said. After the decision, they told Kushner that they would no longer be able to pressure Abbas to accept the American plan, because of popular opposition.

Remarkably, M.B.S. met with Jewish-American organizations in New York in March and criticized Abbas for rejecting offers of peace. “In the last several decades,” he said, “the Palestinian leadership has missed one opportunity after the other and rejected all the peace proposals it was given. It is about time the Palestinians take the proposals and agree to come to the negotiations table or shut up and stop complaining.”

Trump secretly reached out to Abbas at least one more time. On January 17th, the New York *Post* published a column by Michael Goodwin, a Trump partisan, with the headline “ABBAS’ JEW HATRED EXPOSED.” The column described a speech in which Abbas had made comments disparaging Jewish history. It featured a photograph of

Abbas waving two clenched fists. On a copy of the article, Trump wrote a note in large black script, “Mahmoud, Wow—This is the real you?” He signed it, “Best Wishes, Donald Trump.” Some of his aides argued that it would be undiplomatic to send the message. Kushner loved it. “That was the President being the President,” he told aides. The White House sent Trump’s message to Donald Blome, the consul-general in Jerusalem, who had it delivered to Abbas at his headquarters in Ramallah. Kushner told aides that Trump was challenging Abbas, saying, in effect, “I want to know, are you a great leader or are you a terrorist? You show me. It’s your choice.”

When Abbas and his aides received the message, they laughed and interpreted it as charitably as they could. Goodwin’s column was hostile to Abbas, but Trump’s use of Abbas’s first name and the phrase “Best Wishes” indicated, Erekat said, that Trump was trying to draw Abbas into a conversation. Abbas asked Erekat to tell Blome to relay his official response to Trump’s message: “No, that’s not the real me.”

But Abbas did himself no favors when, at a meeting of the Palestinian National Council in late April, in Ramallah, he declared that Ashkenazi Jews came not from the Biblical holy lands but from the Turkic empire of Khazaria, and that the Nazi slaughter of European Jews was the result not of anti-Semitism but of their financial activities—“usury and banking and such.” Netanyahu blasted Abbas, tweeting that he was guilty of repeating “the most contemptible anti-Semitic canards.” Jason Greenblatt, the Middle East envoy, agreed, saying, “Peace cannot be built on this kind of foundation.”

In 1993, the year of the Oslo Accords, Shimon Peres published a book called “The New Middle East.” Writing at a moment of high optimism, Peres foresaw a region that would transcend its intractable feuds and establish a kind of European Community in the desert. This was before the wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, before the collapse of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, before the failure of the Arab Spring, before the

conflict between Sunni and Shia, between the Gulf states and Iran, had deepened.

The Israeli government, and its most fervent supporters in the United States, expected Donald Trump to deliver a new New Middle East. Less than a month after his Inauguration, Trump met with Benjamin Netanyahu in the Oval Office for the first time. After the meeting, the two men issued a joint statement in which they “agreed that there will be no daylight between the United States and Israel” and “reaffirmed the special relationship” between the two allies. They subsequently called for the formation of joint working groups to expand security cooperation. Trump’s most ardent anti-Iran advisers on the National Security Council wanted these working groups to help Israel prepare for future conflicts with Iranian proxies in Lebanon and Syria. But efforts by those who wanted to do more to enable Israel to counter Iran met resistance from more cautious elements within the U.S. national-security establishment, who feared that Israel would initiate a military confrontation and expect the U.S. to finish the job.

In the ensuing power struggle, the anti-Iran hawks in the White House, and their allies in the right-wing media, accused their internal rivals of being more loyal to Obama’s agenda than to Trump’s. By the summer of 2017, they set their sights on the national-security adviser, General H. R. McMaster, casting him as anti-Israel. In March, McMaster was replaced by John Bolton, who took a much harder line against the Palestinians and who has long advocated for regime change in Iran. Shaul Mofaz, a former Israeli Defense Minister, recalled that when Bolton was Ambassador to the United Nations he had “tried to convince me that Israel needs to attack Iran.”

The contours of the new, more truculent and hawkish Middle East strategy revealed themselves in May, with the transfer of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and the Trump Administration’s decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear pact. In both

cases, the Administration chose to gamble, despite repeated warnings about the threat of unrest and dangerous countermeasures by Iran.

As the May 14th ceremony in Jerusalem celebrating the establishment of the new U.S. Embassy got under way, Israeli soldiers were firing on Palestinians who had gathered at the security fence that surrounds the Gaza Strip to protest the occupation. Nearly sixty Palestinians died that day.

While Kushner was on his way to the ceremony, he heard the news and made a last-minute adjustment to his speech, adding, “Those provoking violence are part of the problem and not part of the solution.” When Netanyahu addressed the gathering, he flattered President Trump for his “courage” and willingness to keep his promises and said that he had “made history.” “It’s a great day for peace,” Netanyahu said. Sheldon and Miriam Adelson sat in the front row with Netanyahu and his wife, and Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump, underscoring the roles they played behind the scenes in making the Embassy move happen. Later that evening, Adelson attended a Republican Jewish Coalition reception, where, in brief remarks, he joked about being the shortest man in the room—except when standing “on my wallet.”

The Palestinians, human-rights groups, and various foreign governments accused the Israeli military of using excessive force in Gaza. A spokesman for Theresa May, the British Prime Minister, said, “Israel has the right to defend its borders . . . but the use of live fire is deeply troubling.” President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, of Turkey, tweeted that Netanyahu was the Prime Minister of “an apartheid state.” Israeli government spokesmen replied that the Army was defending Israeli people and territory; the Palestinians were, in fact, armed with rocks and explosive devices and had used “human shields,” they said.

In 2014, when Israeli forces accidentally shelled a United Nations school in the Gaza Strip, killing more than ten Palestinian civilians, the State

Department’s spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, issued a blunt statement, saying that the United States was “appalled” by the “disgraceful” Israeli attack. Afterward, Israel’s Ambassador, Ron Dermer, called Denis McDonough, Obama’s chief of staff, to say, “I’m appalled that you’re appalled.” When Trump’s deputy White House press secretary, Raj Shah, was asked on May 14th whether the United States was calling on Israel to show restraint in dealing with the protests in Gaza, Shah replied, “We believe that Hamas is responsible for these tragic deaths, that their rather cynical exploitation of the situation is what’s leading to these deaths, and we want them to stop.” Afterward, Dermer visited the White House and pulled Shah aside to thank him. “This is a sharp contrast from what we received in 2014,” Dermer told Shah, adding that he was “pleased to see a very different reaction from the White House while the issue was hot.”

Later the same day, at an event in Washington marking the seventieth anniversary of Israel’s independence, the Israeli Embassy released a commemorative book “honoring Americans who have strengthened Israel and its alliance with the United States.” The Israelis had planned to honor only one American President in the book—Harry Truman, who recognized the Jewish state in 1948—but Dermer decided to add a second President to the list, Donald Trump; the entry praised his “bold decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.” Dermer sent copies to the White House so that Trump could see his name alongside Truman’s and Albert Einstein’s.

In response to the violence in Gaza, the Gulf states issued ritual denunciations and support for the Palestinians, but Israeli officials regarded the language as unmistakably bland, similar to their reactions to the Jerusalem decision. That their emphasis had shifted away from the Palestinians and to the spectre of a confrontation with Iran was obvious.

Netanyahu had long supported moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, but, in contrast to the Adelsons, he didn’t make it a priority. Netanyahu’s main request of Trump was the reversal of Obama-era policies concerning Iran.





Like M.B.Z. and M.B.S., he wanted Trump to pivot from what he saw as a policy of containment, accommodation, and restraint to one that aims to roll back Iran's military capabilities and regional ambitions.

Trump announced the American withdrawal from the nuclear deal on May 8th, a few days before the Jerusalem Embassy ceremony. Dermer said it was his single "best day" as Israel's Ambassador to the United States. "We were on cruise control heading over a cliff and Trump has now turned the wheel," Dermer told me.

Kushner agreed with Dermer that Obama had strengthened Iran at the expense of relations with Israel and the Gulf states, and left office no closer to bringing about an Arab-Israeli peace. "If we're going to take on Iran, we want to do it all together," Kushner recently told aides. Bolton and his hawkish advisers have started talks with Israeli financial and intelligence experts, aimed at reimposing economic sanctions on Iran. Netanyahu suggested in private meetings with current and former U.S. officials that Iran's government was more vulnerable than it appeared; he argued for increased pressure that could lead to its collapse. "Iran is in conflict with us, Iran is in conflict with the United States, Iran is in conflict with just about all the Arab states in the Middle East," Netanyahu said in an interview with Fox News, in mid-May. "I think we should unite together under President Trump's leadership to kick Iran out of Syria." Mike Pompeo, in his first major address as Secretary of State, echoed Netanyahu's demands, and suggested that the Iranian people should reject the clerical government in Tehran.

Kushner intends to release a Middle East peace plan in the coming months. His message to the Palestinians is "If you want to work with us, work with us. If you don't want to work with us, we're not going to chase after you." Netanyahu, who was never enthusiastic about Trump's talk of reaching the "ultimate deal," knows that the plan, in order to pass muster with Kushner's Gulf Arab partners, will have to ask Israel to make concessions and not look like something concocted by the Central Committee of Likud. If Kush-



*"Computer, order me two long-sleeved cotton crewnecks in dark wine and green heather."*

ner's plan fails to offer the Palestinians a capital in East Jerusalem and gives Israel sovereignty over the Old City, Arab leaders may have no choice but to reject it. A senior Administration official said only that the plan will focus on "how you make the lives of the Israeli and Palestinian people much better," and described it as "fair."

Netanyahu's assumption is that Abbas, who has been counting for decades on a full-fledged final settlement and a state, will reject Kushner's meliorist blueprint. That would put the onus on M.B.Z., M.B.S., and other Arab leaders to decide whether to follow Abbas's lead or chart a different course. Netanyahu hopes that Gulf Arab leaders will not disapprove of the new American offer, and opt instead to deepen cooperation against Iran and other enemies. Toward the end of the Obama Administration, one of Abbas's top aides told a U.S. official that "our worst nightmare" would be for Netanyahu to find a way to divide the Gulf states from the Palestinians. "Bibi's greatest dream and

Abbas's worst nightmare could be coming true," the former U.S. official told me.

Recently, cooperation among Israel and the Gulf states has expanded into the Sinai Peninsula, where M.B.Z. has deployed Emirati forces to train and assist Egyptian troops who have been fighting militants with help from Israeli military aircraft and intelligence agencies. U.A.E. forces have, on occasion, conducted counterterrorism missions in Sinai. Although Netanyahu would like to make these new relationships more public, he doesn't want to put M.B.Z. and M.B.S. at risk. Eventually, Netanyahu hopes that those leaders will take steps to recognize Israel—a moment that the Palestinians, especially in their current state, would be loath to see.

The Palestinians seem to be the likely losers in the new New Middle East. As a senior Arab official said of the strategic alliance, "With or without a peace plan, it's happening." A senior Trump adviser said, "Iran is the reason why this is all happening." ♦

## MEAL TICKET

*Foodies are flocking to a remote archipelago for the ultimate locavore meal.*

BY REBECCA MEAD

**T**he Faroe Islands, an austere, mountainous archipelago marooned in the North Atlantic two hundred miles north of Scotland, has a landmass of only five hundred and forty square miles, and is sparsely populated with fifty thousand people and seventy thousand sheep. But, looked at another way, the country, an autonomous outpost of the Kingdom of Denmark, is much larger: its territorial waters extend for more than a hundred thousand square miles around nearly seven hundred miles of coastline. Only one village, Vatnsøyrar, isn't on the coast, and wherever you are on any of the Faroes' eighteen islands you're never more than three miles from the crashing, frigid ocean. Like the human body, the Faroes are mostly water.

The inhabitants of the islands, which were settled by Vikings in the ninth and tenth centuries, have always depended on sustenance from the ocean. But the local diet is surprisingly selective. The waters of the Faroes teem with edible creatures that the Faroese do not eat. They don't gorge on the mahogany clams, buried in underwater sand, that can live for centuries. They ignore the abundant mussels that cling to coastal rocks, and consider langoustines and sea urchins to be revolting. It's a favorite game among Faroese children to pick up sea urchins and hurl them at one another, because they make a satisfying splat on impact.

The Faroese do eat cod and haddock—masses of it, typically prepared in one of two ways. When eaten fresh, the fish is subjected to prolonged boiling (or “killed twice,” as some locals put it). The Faroese also preserve fish, though not with such familiar Nordic techniques as salting or smoking; the islands are so windswept that almost no trees grow, and as a result

there's little lumber available either to manufacture salt or to generate smoke. Instead, a catch is suspended from the eaves of a house, like wind chimes on a porch, where it dries and ferments. After it is sufficiently decomposed, a process that takes several weeks, it is boiled, then served alongside boiled potatoes. A condiment of fermented tallow, made from lamb intestines, is poured on top. This dish is as delicious to an islander as a crustacean freshly plucked from the clean waters of the North Atlantic might be to just about anyone other than a Faroese.

It's a mystery why the islanders decline to eat a rich supply of foodstuffs that elsewhere would be considered delicacies. When I visited the archipelago recently, locals offered me several explanations. Many said that the Faroese are afraid of getting food poisoning from eating anything too raw or mollusky, a caution that has hardened into tradition. It's as if, in the ancestral era, a Faroese had eaten a mussel and died, while, a thousand miles south, his Gallic equivalent had discovered that a mussel becomes a tasty morsel when steamed, especially if you have wine, garlic, and parsley at hand.

Sveinur Trondarson, a journalist turned tour guide, suggested that his countrymen's avoidance of shellfish might have its origins in the Biblical prohibition in Leviticus 11:12. A businessman in Tórshavn, the country's diminutive capital city, bluntly ascribed the islanders' self-imposed dietary limitations to a lack of native intelligence, compounded by geographical remoteness. “The Faroese are not stupid, but they were so isolated that for a long time they didn't know that the vast sea around us was filled with so many great things,” he said. Leif Høj, the co-owner of Fofish,

a company that markets and supplies Faroese fish internationally, said, “We eat cod and haddock like anything. But twenty-five years ago, when the fishermen caught monkfish, they would throw it all out!” Høj is a born-again Christian, like a growing number of islanders, and he cited the country's social conservatism: just as the Faroese like their society to be predictable, they don't like their fish to be too fishy.

Bjarti Petersen, a professional diver who works for a fishery, suggested that Faroese fishermen have an aversion to mollusks because they use clams and mussels as bait. “You don't eat bait,” he said, when I visited him at his apartment, in Tórshavn, on the largest island, Streymoy. Not only did eating bait seem gross; it made no economic sense. “You have a clam this size”—Petersen made an “O” with his forefinger and thumb—“and, with one of those, you can get a big cod.” As we spoke, Petersen's wife made tea, and their eighteen-month-old daughter sat on a couch, watching a DVD of “Frozen.” The wondrous fictional landscape of Arendelle—with its deep fjords and craggy mountains—looked just like the world outside her door. One person's weird is another person's normal.

**W**hen I asked Poul Andrias Ziska, a twenty-eight-year-old chef and a native of Tórshavn, why his countrymen rejected so much of the bounty of the North Atlantic, he spoke of social class. In the Faroes, he said, shellfish counts as a poor man's food, and it has historically been considered shameful to eat it, especially compared with the fresh or salt-cured meats that, under the influence of the Danes, furnish the tables of high society. The islands, which fell under Danish rule in the fourteenth century,





*Two Faroese delicacies, fermented ocean perch and wind-dried pilot whale, hanging in a shed perforated with air vents.*





*Poul Andrias Ziska, Koks's twenty-eight-year-old head chef, plates a dish of crab, fermented leek, and pickled elderflower.*

became self-governing in 1948, but the relationship between the two countries remains that of a resentful subaltern state and a condescending colonial power. The joke among Danes is that the inhabitants of the Faroes are descended from Vikings who were too seasick to make it all the way to Iceland.

Similar feelings of shame haunt the consumption of traditional Faroese specialties like fermented lamb. Joints of freshly butchered lamb are hung in a wooden shed, known as a *hjalur*, that is chinked with drafty gaps, allowing the islands' incessant winds to blow through it. Wind and time bestow on the meat a layer of greenish mold, and a pungency somewhere between Parmesan cheese and death. "The Faroese food, especially the fermented food, is something you keep to yourself," Ziska told me. "You eat it, but only if no one is looking."

Anyone who secures a reservation at Koks, a restaurant that Ziska runs, finds that his Faroese cooking is hardly poor man's food. Dinner at Koks,

which can serve no more than twenty-four diners a night, costs about two hundred and twenty dollars a person, with a wine pairing adding a hundred and seventy dollars more. On offer is a tasting menu, of eighteen courses, made up almost exclusively of foods that are raised or cultivated on the Faroes, or found in the local waters. Among the prominent ingredients are lamb, fish, shellfish, seaweed, and such root vegetables as potatoes and turnips.

Some of Ziska's creations would shock the palate of a Faroese fisherman but delight a sophisticated resident of San Francisco. He presents a raw mahogany clam on the half shell, its flesh sliced over kale purée, with kelp broth spooned on top. (Bjarti Petersen, who works a few days a week as Koks's diver, stores his catch in a crate that remains submerged in a nearby fjord until it's time to prepare meals.) Ziska also offers imaginative twists on traditional dishes. A "sandwich," made with cracker-like slices of dried cod skin, contains a thin piece of salted gannet, a seabird common

to the Faroes; a thinner slice of salted blubber, butchered from one of the eight hundred or so whales slaughtered annually in a community hunt; and a sprinkle of fresh herbs foraged from the mountainsides.

In Faroese, *koks* means a flirt, or someone who fusses over something in pursuit of perfection. (The restaurant's name was not chosen because of its swaggering phallic connotations in English.) Early last year, Koks received a Michelin star, the first to be awarded in the Faroes. The judges cited "dishes with distinct flavors . . . carefully prepared to a consistently high standard." When the representative from Michelin paid Koks a visit, the restaurant occupied a modernist house, with large windows, at the base of a mountain that overlooks the coastal hamlet of Kirkjubøur. The village is one of the most picturesque spots on the islands, with a turf-roofed farmhouse that dates to the eleventh century, and the ruins of a cathedral built in 1300. The Michelin citation led to a surge in reservations, especially from international gastronomes



who were not deterred—and who sometimes were energized—by the necessity of taking a flight from Copenhagen, Reykjavík, or Edinburgh.

Last August, Koks's lease on the house in Kirkjubøur, which is a fifteen-minute cab ride from Tórshavn, ended. The restaurant closed for the winter, and when I arrived in the Faroes, in early April, Koks was about to reopen in an even more remote location, amid forbidding mountains near Lake Leynar, half an hour northwest of Tórshavn. The new Koks doesn't even have a road leading to it. After you pull off a single-lane highway, you follow a dirt track that peters out along the lake's shoreline, a ribbon of black volcanic sand. Then you must ford a stream and drive, for several minutes, on a rutted, rocky pathway until you reach a modest turf-roofed farmhouse that was built in 1741. It is a fitting venue for a superlatively perverse dining experience.

When I visited Koks one bright afternoon, the new space was scheduled to open officially the following evening. There were only traces of snow at the tops of the surrounding mountains: the Gulf Stream keeps winters in the Faroes relatively mild. Construction workers were bustling to finish an extensive renovation of the farmhouse and the grounds. Men were installing green plastic matting along a path between a gravel parking lot and the stone steps of the farmhouse. The matting was to be disguised with moisture-absorbing, high-heel-tolerant, mud-colored sand, which would obviate the necessity of guests walking through actual mud. Outside the farmhouse was a new *hjallur*. For the moment, it was being used to store construction equipment, not meat, but that would soon change.

In 2016, Koks established a pop-up restaurant for a few weeks in Copenhagen, and had great success with a mobile *hjallur* that had been converted into a small dining space, with glass windows instead of vented wooden walls. "We pimped it up a little bit," Ziska recalled. "The atmosphere was crazy—there was interaction between the guests, which we want to work on

here." Diners at the new Koks location were to be welcomed into the *hjallur* for one or two courses. One planned dish was a sushi-like confection: raw fermented lamb served atop a cake of crispy fried reindeer lichen, cemented in place with an emulsion of mushrooms and pickled berries. Diners would be invited to sprinkle the lamb with desiccated seaweed flakes that tasted a bit like truffles. The farmhouse had the usual tables for two and four, and also a large communal table, which could seat up to eight people. Ziska imagined that it often would be occupied by single diners, or by friends travelling together who didn't want to eat alone, or by "people who have been married too long."

Ziska is slender and intense, with a ginger beard and long curly hair, like that of a Romantic poet. He had spent much of the winter researching new flavors and techniques, and was eager to try them out on his guests. "When we first opened, we got maybe the wrong guests—people who expected a lot of food, to get full," Ziska told me. "But over time we have distilled those people away. People know if they want one dish, one steak, they shouldn't come here."

When he first dared to serve fermented lamb tallow, in 2012, foreign diners compared its strong taste to that of blue cheese. "I have been eating it my whole life, and I never made that connection," Ziska said. "But once you start thinking of it like that you can work further on it. 'O.K., what does blue cheese go well with?'" He now serves fermented lamb tallow as a paste with dried cod, smeared on a cheesy waffle—a savory twist on a traditional Faroese sweet that is usually served with coffee.

Some of Koks's dishes, such as a raw queen scallop served in its shell, are self-explanatory, but others require elucidation. Ziska told me that he had been developing a variation on a traditional method of preparing roasted puffin, a seabird that was once plentiful in the Faroes but whose numbers have diminished drastically because of climate change. A Faroese recipe book from 1902 recommends stuffing the seabird with pancake bat-

ter flavored with raisins and cardamom, and then baking it. The result, Ziska told me, is a filling but leaden dish. In his version, a pancake is wrapped around slices of baked razorbill, a more plentiful relative of the puffin. Ziska served a similar dish last year but used fulmar, another seabird. Fulmar has a very strong, fatty flavor, similar to that of cod-liver oil. Razorbill is milder. He said of the dish, "It's a beef Wellington, but with a batter around this gamy bird, and it tastes a little bit of fish."

The evening before I met Ziska, a soft opening had been held for a dozen or so of his friends. Overseeing Koks's staff of nine chefs—each of whom is from a different country—and five waiters had left him feeling wired, and he had been up late in the restaurant's cozy, warmly lit lounge, where akvavit and wine bottles were displayed along shelves. The room has pine benches that are topped with Faroese sheepskins: off-white, brown, black, and almost mauve. (There are so many sheep on the islands that even professional knitters cannot keep up with the supply; every spring, entire flocks' worth of sheared wool is burned, for want of a better use.) There are three connected dining rooms, and, as is to be expected in an old farmhouse, the windows are small, framing diminutive squares of a stark mountainside. Ziska spoke with relish of subverting guests' expectations of natural beauty. "At Kirkjubøur, it was a panoramic view—it was completely beautiful—but in the end I don't want it to be about the view," he said. "It should be about the people and the food and the wine." In a country where spectacular vistas are hard to avoid, Koks was offering the absence of one as the ultimate treat. Ziska said, "Here, you sit, and when it gets dark you don't see *anything*."

Koks opened in April, 2011, and Ziska, one of the first employees, started as a trainee, when he was barely out of his teens. The restaurant was launched by Johannes Jensen, an entrepreneur who is the islands' closest equivalent to Danny Meyer. (Jensen owns twelve restaurants.) At first,

Koks occupied the dining room of Tórshavn's fanciest hotel, the Føroyar, which is on a hillside on the outskirts of town. Until Koks opened, one of the hotel dining room's featured items was Steak Hawaii, a chunk of imported meat with a ring of imported, canned pineapple on top. Koks's new approach was not entirely to the liking of locals, who had treated the hotel as a special-occasion destination. "At the beginning, people were laughing at us for putting a small thing on a big plate, or for serving raw fish," Ziska told me. "And in the Faroe Islands paying for food is considered crazy. You have the fish in the ocean, and you have a boat, or you know someone who has a boat, and you go out and get it and cook it yourself—that's the mentality."

Ziska initially worked at Koks under Leif Sørensen, the head chef, who had learned his trade in French kitchens and at Kommandanten, a Michelin-starred Danish-French restaurant in Copenhagen. In 2004, he was one of the signatories of the "New Nordic Kitchen Manifesto," joining chefs from Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and Greenland, all of whom pledged to use Nordic produce and Nordic methods to create an innovative contemporary cuisine. The most celebrated signatory is René Redzepi, whose restaurant Noma, in Copenhagen, opened in 2003 and has since earned two Michelin stars, for such dishes as confit of snail, roasted cod head, and cake made from plankton. The menu at Koks aspired to be both firmly rooted in native produce and brashly experimental: raw scallops and horseradish were mixed with milk and liquid nitrogen. Select fermented foods were introduced. A lavishly illustrated book about the restaurant, published in 2012, contains a photograph of what became a signature appetizer: a test tube containing a mouthful of dried-fish crisps, roasted pearl barley, sugar-glazed seaweed, and fragments of roasted fermented lamb. The book includes some unintentionally comic images of Koks's team—including a younger and considerably more kempt-looking Ziska—foraging on Faroese hillsides for wild thyme or

lovage while dressed in kitchen whites.

Although Ziska was not yet the head chef, he contributed several dishes to the menu, including beet ice cream and skate and sea sandwort with mussel froth. "Poul Andrias was the crazy guy," Sørensen told me. "He thought it was important to have a twisted mind." In 2014, Sørensen left Koks, after disagreements with Jensen about how it should be run. He will soon open an affordable restaurant for locals, on Tórshavn's harbor, that will not adhere strictly to New Nordic principles. "It is nice that I can use tomatoes again," Sørensen told me.

Ziska, who in 2013 moved to Copenhagen to work at Geranium, Denmark's only Michelin three-star restaurant, was about to start a new job, at Noma, when he heard of Sørensen's departure. He immediately returned to Koks as head chef. Under his guidance, the menu has become no less radical, but it is more Faroese. Not as much effort is made to give dishes an approachable French veneer, or to conceal unfamiliar local ingredients with technical wizardry. Ziska has stopped putting fermented lamb in a test tube. "You couldn't really taste it," he recalled. "It was *there*, and you had the story about it, but it was so far from what it is in reality that it wasn't even close to the real thing."

Under Ziska, Koks gleefully embraces the potentially disgusting aspects of Faroese cuisine. In the nineteenth century, a Danish physician named Peter Ludvig Panum wrote a treatise entitled "Observations Made During the Measles Epidemic on the Faroe Islands in the Year 1846," which noted that the archipelago's inhabitants regularly ate meat that was crawling with maggots. Panum's writings made many Faroese feel embarrassed about their culinary traditions, but Ziska does not doubt the account's accuracy. "If you ferment the meat and the weather goes wrong, then you get maggots in it," he noted, cheerfully. "It's a completely natural thing to happen to any meat. Back then, you couldn't throw any meat away—it was too valuable. You had to eat it to survive. What we did back then—and still do today—is you cook the meat



*Johannes Jensen, the entrepreneur behind Koks,*





*suggested that the beauty of eating at the restaurant is the radical proximity of the farm to the table.*



but add rice.” (Rice has been imported for centuries.) One dish that Ziska has served at Koks is a twist on his ancestors’ starvation-level fare: flatbread filled with cooked fermented lamb and topped with ground mealworms, which Ziska buys from a pet-food supplier on the Internet. “Maggots are a very good source of protein, and could potentially save the planet, but when I give them to diners I don’t present it in that much depth,” he told me. “I just tell that fun little story about the rice.” Diners at Koks tend not to be timid eaters; with rare exceptions, the mealworms go down the hatch.

Two days before I ate dinner at Koks, I visited the smallest inhabited island in the Faroes, Stóra Dímun, to learn more about traditional Faroese cuisine—in particular, *ræst*, a broad term for food that has been fermented. (The Faroese language has dozens of words for degrees of rottenness: *stadnaður* means “dried on the outside, soft on the inside”; *karmoðin* means “completely rotten.”) Stóra Dímun, six hundred acres of mountains that shear off into frightful cliffs on all sides, can be reached by helicopter three times a week. Visiting used to require a hazardous boat landing. Back then, the island was a workplace of last resort for unmarried mothers and their offspring.

Stóra Dímun is home to the farm of one extended family: a brother and a sister, both eighth-generation farmers on the island, and their spouses and children, who range in age from one to fourteen. Eva Petersen, the sister, greeted me in head-to-foot oilskins—it was raining and misty. After picking up a box of groceries from the helicopter, she took me on a short tour of the farm, where, she told me, the family raises about four hundred and fifty ewes, and slaughters a similar number of lambs annually. As we looked around stone-walled pens teeming with sheep, she passed on stories of her ancestors’ harsh lives and early deaths. Her great-great-grandfather, known simply as “the blind farmer,” was memorialized in a portrait that hung on a farmhouse wall. He lost his sight at the age of thirty, and, some years later, he was stand-

ing on the edge of a cliff face, holding one end of a rope that was tied around the waist of another man, who was descending the rock face to collect puffin eggs. When the man lost his footing, he pulled the blind farmer over the edge, and they both fell to their deaths. The blind farmer’s son, Petersen’s great-grandfather, also died in a puffin-egg accident: he was foraging on a cliff when a rock above him came loose and brained him.

The centerpiece of the farm is a spacious *hjallur*, inside which were hanging the remains of the summer harvest: a few dozen joints of gently greening lamb, looking less like the wares in a butcher’s shop than like shards of granite patterned delicately with lichen. In the farmhouse, inflated

lamb bladders, which the family generally used for making sausage, were strung from the ceiling as decorations—blowing them up is a favorite activity of the children. The kitchen table was laid with homemade bread, butter, jam, a tureen of dried lamb tallow, and a haunch of fermented lamb. Petersen cut me a thin slice of meat. It had a consistency like *breisaola*, and a strong flavor that was at once meaty and cheesy, and also something else entirely, which might generously have been characterized as umami. The lamb haunch was not at all to my taste, but, given a choice between eating it and foraging for a puffin egg, I know which I’d choose.

On returning to Tórshavn, I had a meal at a restaurant called Ræst, which is owned by Johannes Jensen, the en-

## THE KING OF FIRE

My first night without you  
my wings fold back in on themselves—

all those birds inside or  
released by your hands—now I trace

my fingers along my collarbone

trying to find where they live. I keep  
touching my scar—it feels like swallowing

night, like flyers for a lost boy—  
what if it’s true our bodies are not our own,

but only become manifest (like this  
poem) when activated by another’s touch

what if the thing activated is outlined—  
roughly—by the word *body* . . . This

morning my daughter stood before me  
naked & said her body was not

her own—she’s been sick for two days—  
smiling, she seemed to

like it, the feeling, that

floating above . . . I worry it’s a set-up, a  
manifestation of the addict I’ve



passed on through the blood, my talent  
 for slipping into the bigger thing  
  
 a craving for it . . . O  
  
 to live without thoughts—no rats in our  
 shoulders, only birds,  
  
 & the willingness to let someone  
 inside. What if  
  
 these things we call our bodies are not  
 singular or contained, what if  
  
 they finally become irrelevant . . .  
 after so much time trying to be grounded,  
  
 to land on this earth, so strange  
 to imagine we might simply pass by ourselves  
  
 for a moment, en route to somewhere else . . .  
 What's on the other side? A nap?  
  
 A parade? It works—matchbox  
  
 sparks, lightning bugs, I'm completely inside  
 that boy who feels like he's inside me.  
  
 And this—  
*I want to know everything about the parade.*

—Nick Flynn

trepreneur who founded Koks. Ræst, which occupies one of the oldest buildings in Tórshavn, has small wood-paneled rooms, giving it the feel of a salt-box house on Nantucket, though it is imbued with a distinctive, near-rancid smell. Ræst allows foodies lured to the Faroes by the avant-garde cuisine at Koks to sample native foods in something close to their traditional preparations. For some foreign diners, its pleasures are strictly anthropological. As I sat down, Jensen said, “You will probably dislike everything you eat. Sorry.”

The experience of dining at Ræst was like what it might be for an American to consume an extended meal in which Marmite was the central ingredient. The set menu began with an appetizer of dried cod, whale blub-

ber, and dried whale meat (which was black and tasted of seawater, blood, and iron). The first main course featured stewed whale cooked in a risotto-like mess of barley and seaweed. It was served with a glass of sherry, which, Jensen explained, is a better accompaniment to fermented dishes than more insipid wines. More *ræst* dishes followed, including a version of the islands' most common fish dish: fermented cod served with puréed potatoes and leeks and topped with fermented lamb tallow. The tallow was vividly rank. The fish was toothsome and chewy—a bit like bacalao—but unsalted. “It tastes a little bit of ammonia, doesn't it?” Jensen inquired, solicitously.

Like many Faroese, Jensen started off in the fish business. He spent the

better part of two decades in the trade, primarily as a marketer and a sales manager. He began to travel for work, and, after being exposed to fine restaurants in France and elsewhere, he became determined to nurture something equivalent in the Faroes. “Fermented food is maybe the most important cultural heritage we've got,” he said, as the next dish, aged lamb with rutabaga, arrived. “A chef coming from Denmark says that the Faroese lamb is delicious—much better than they have there. He can't understand why we destroy it by fermenting it, and we say completely the opposite. To put garlic on it? *That*, to me, is a bit sad.” The aged lamb on my plate looked like shreds of an automobile tire, and it tasted like something I wouldn't be able to wash out of my hair for a week.

Jensen explained that each farmer's *ræst* has a singular terroir. Some farms produce meat that is particularly salty, perhaps because of the direction of the wind in relation to the sea, and it's said that certain farmers can tell which Faroese island a sheep has been raised on simply by tasting its meat. Jensen suggested that the beauty of eating in the archipelago—and, especially, at Koks—is the radical proximity of the farm to the table. “You are sitting in a restaurant in Stockholm, or in London, and a chef is explaining that this is from a farmer here, and there, and there, and you look out the window and you see traffic,” he said. “But at a restaurant in the Faroe Islands, in the middle of the North Atlantic, you put it on the plate and the guest sees what he eats through the window. He *feels* what he eats. That, to me, is the difference.” In Jensen's opinion, there is no reason that Koks can't become the world's finest restaurant. “We are living in the world's best pantry,” he said. “Why should a restaurant like Noma become the world's best, when we have our raw materials? Why can't we do it ourselves?”

Dessert arrived: blissfully palatable fermented gooseberries served with a rosemary-flavored pudding. We discussed the new location of Koks, and Jensen told me that he was thrilled with the rugged setting. But there was one risk: the access route to the restaurant



*A mahogany clam, one of the ocean's most long-lived creatures, served at Koks. Faroese fishermen use clams as bait.*

sometimes becomes severely flooded. “Some years often, some years seldom,” Jensen said. “The key word is ‘flexibility.’ We will have to find a solution to solve it when it occurs.”

A small fleet of taxi-drivers has been trained to ferry guests to Koks. On leaving town, they bypass a low road, which was built in the nineteen-nineties, and instead take a high road, which rises more than fifteen hundred feet above sea level, with views over spectacular fjords. When I took a cab to get to my seven-o’clock reservation on the opening night, my driver noted that during the winter the winds on the high road had reached seventy-five miles an hour. This evening, the breeze was relatively placid. As we drove along, a black sheep wandered onto the deserted road ahead of us. We watched it cross to the other side. “Part of the show,” the driver said.

Taxis pull up where the paved road stops, by a customized *hjallur* overlooking Lake Leynar. I was invited inside, and met several other diners,

who were sitting around a table and sipping the first course: a bowl of lamb broth, served with pale ale from a microbrewery outside Tórshavn. We all introduced ourselves, and, unsurprisingly, none of us was Faroese. The group included a technical manager from Toronto, who was on an extended hiking vacation and was dressed in perspiration-wicking fabrics; an English representative of Atlantic Airways, the Faroese national airline; a Danish psychologist who was spending a few days teaching Faroese hospital workers about trauma; and a young tech guy from New York, who said that he had been “nomading” around the world for several months, and who wore a woollen cap pulled over an almost shaved head. After the broth, we piled into a four-wheel-drive vehicle for the trek across the beach, over the stream, and up to the restaurant. Inside, we were introduced to two other guests, a prosperous-looking couple from Copenhagen, a businessman nearing retirement and his wife. All of us shared the large, square communal table.

Champagne was poured, and a flurry of chefs came from the kitchen to show off the day’s catch: two big platters filled with live langoustines and clams and mussels. One desperately mortal langoustine heaved itself off a platter and made a break for it, in the direction of the tech nomad, before being whisked back to its fate in the kitchen, a tiny space at one end of the farmhouse. (A larger prep kitchen is in a former shepherd’s hut a few feet up the hillside.) Ziska emerged from the kitchen to present each diner with a spoonful of salted roe from the capelin fish, a kind of smelt, served atop a purée of cauliflower, under which lurked a puddle of bright-green dill oil. “We get a hundred and eighty kilos of fish, and from that we get approximately ten kilos of roe,” Ziska said, as the diners nodded approvingly.

As successive courses were presented, and waiters and chefs scurried around the restaurant, ducking their heads to avoid hitting low rafters, members of our group compared elite dining experiences. The psychologist reported that the staff at Gera-



nium, the Copenhagen restaurant, had tried to upsell him on wine. The businessman from Copenhagen told a story about his daughter attending a friend's wedding dinner at Noma. "Who was she marrying—royalty?" the Atlantic Airways rep exclaimed. The conversation was conducted entirely in fluent English, and the atmosphere was so convivial that when Ziska's gannet-and-whale-blubber sandwich was brought out its unusual contents were barely remarked on.

Ziska and a clutch of deputy chefs served the mahogany clams, explaining that they are among the ocean's most long-lived creatures. "A mahogany clam can live to five hundred," he said. After the cheesy waffle with fermented-lamb spread, hailed as delicious, came a palate cleanser: a dollop of stewed rhubarb between peppery nasturtium leaves smaller than the pads of one's fingertips. It looked like a fairy's portion, or a chef's practical joke.

Two hours had passed since we had arrived at the *hjallur*, and by the time the first main course was presented it was pitch-dark outside, as promised. Halibut, procured to Ziska's specifications by Leif Høj, of Fofish, was served sashimi style, with watercress and toasted buckwheat. It was so fresh and flavorsome that it made the ancient Faroese failure to discover the joys of raw seafood seem like an epic tragedy.

A Grüner Veltliner wine was poured and a dish of crab was served, accompanied by a cream of fermented leeks and pickled elderflower. The conversation turned to fermentation. The tech nomad described an Icelandic dish that he'd heard of—it involved burying shark meat until it rotted, then digging it up and eating it. The Atlantic Airways rep talked about visiting the caves in Roquefort, France, and learning all about the region's cherished mold. The engineer from Toronto changed the subject to exotic travel, and was recalling a memorable walk in Spain along the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route—it was all about the journey, not the destination—when the langoustines were brought back to the table. Their claws had been barbecued into immobility, and their heads stuffed with a cream made from their own brains. We poked

and sucked avidly on the claws, extracting the sweet flesh, as a Trebbiano was poured and the businessman from Copenhagen offered a toast, "because the company is as good as the food."

Koks's version of *ræst* lamb was next: dark snarls of flesh that looked like caramelized red cabbage. Pieces of the meat were served inside layers of roasted onions, with pickled lingonberries on top. When presenting the dish, a chef offered a confession: "They are not Faroese lingonberries. They are from Sweden." He added, "But we peel them ourselves." The guests generally approved of the dish, though I couldn't help feeling that, in my few days on the islands, I had consumed enough fermented meat for a lifetime.

The jolly atmosphere was enhanced by the frequent replenishment of wine. The businessman from Copenhagen took out his phone and showed us photographs of vintage cars that he owned, and then everyone began talking about Bitcoin. A waiter entered the room carrying eight alarming-looking knives, sheathed in wooden scabbards decorated with mother-of-pearl inlays. We needed the knives for the fourteenth, and final, savory course: the razorbill Wellington. The pancake-wrapped seabird was topped by a lumpy, bloody-looking sauce made from beet, elderberry, and rose hip.

"It has a little bit the taste of liver," the engineer from Toronto remarked.

"It's not dissimilar to puffin, but puffin is less livery," the rep from Atlantic Airways said.

I found the razorbill inedible, but after enduring the meal at Ræst I felt relieved: it was the only dish at Koks that had defeated me. For the most part, the succession of plates had ranged between very pleasant and preternaturally delicious. (For me, the raw seafood, in particular the antediluvian clam, was a highlight.) What Koks offered its diners wasn't culinary perfection: it was uniqueness. In an era when matcha macarons and eel ceviche are available across the globe, its patrons were thrilled to spend an evening eating things that nobody they knew had ever eaten. The presentation had been simultaneously theatrical and artisanal, and imbued with a spirit of luxurious severity: diners got only a few bites of

courses that had taken hours of effort to prepare. Above all, there was a strange satisfaction in how hard it had been to get to the restaurant. Fäviken, the Michelin two-star restaurant in the snowy hinterlands of northern Sweden, was positively metropolitan by comparison; it was on the European mainland, after all. At Koks, we were getting not just extreme cuisine but an experience that was, quite literally, outlandish. A bunch of foreigners had gone to absurd lengths to eat food that even the natives didn't fully expect us to like. Looking around the table, I calculated that, collectively, we would be burning through roughly thirty-two thousand air miles to enjoy a fanatically locavore, ecologically pristine meal.

As the evening drew to a close, a series of desserts was served, including a crème brûlée infused with red seaweed. A carafe of coffee was delivered to the table with a dried salmon skin wrapped around its neck, as a holder. (The engineer sniffed it: not fishy.) The guests strategized about sharing taxis back to Tórshavn—one challenge of remote-chic dining is getting home. As the first carload departed, the rest of us discussed the meal, and, despite the delight that had been expressed all evening, the verdict was not one of universal acclaim.

"I expected some *meat*," the wife of the businessman from Copenhagen said. Her husband agreed, adding that he would have liked a proper piece of lamb. "For what I am paying here, I should be full, but I could go out and have a hot dog," he said. Another diner, a British woman, wondered if the atmosphere lacked spark, and noted, "*We* were the entertainment." I didn't point out that this was exactly what Ziska had intended.

"I would have liked some meat," the businessman's wife said again.

With repletion came dissatisfaction: a hunger for something more, or for something different. Everyone felt a bit drained. Ducking under the rafters by the door, then taking care not to slide on the mud that the workers had not entirely remediated, we straggled out into the all-consuming darkness, and began the long passage home across the sea. ♦



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**T**he couple decided that tonight they would go out for sushi. Two years ago, they'd met online. Three months ago, they'd moved in together. Previously, she'd lived in Boston, but now she lived in New York with him.

The woman was a research analyst at a bank downtown. The man was a ceramic-pottery instructor at a studio uptown. Both were in their late thirties, and neither of them wanted kids. Both enjoyed Asian cuisine, specifically sushi, specifically omakase. It was the element of surprise that they liked. And it suited them in different ways. She got nervous looking at a list of options and would second-guess herself. He enjoyed going with the flow. What is the best choice? she'd ask him when flipping through menus with many pages and many words, and he'd reply, The best choice is whatever you feel like eating at the moment.

Before they got there, the man had described the restaurant as a "hole-in-the-wall." He had found it on a list of top sushi places in central Harlem. Not that there were many. So, instead of top sushi places, it may just have been a list of all sushi places. Be prepared, he said. Nothing is actually a hole-in-the-wall, she replied. Yet the restaurant was as the man had described: a tiny room with a sushi bar and a cash register. Behind the bar stood an old sushi chef. Behind the cash register sat a young waitress. The woman estimated that the hole could seat no more than six adults and a child. Good thing sushi pieces were small. Upon entering, she gave the man a look. The look said, Is this going to be O.K.? Usually, for sushi, they went downtown to places that were brightly lit, crowded, and did not smell so strongly of fish. But tonight downtown trains were experiencing delays because someone had jumped onto the tracks at Port Authority and been hit.

That was something the woman had to get used to about New York. In Boston, the subway didn't get you anywhere, but the stations were generally clean and quiet and no one bothered you on the actual train. Also, there were rarely delays due to people jumping in front of trains. Probably because the trains came so infrequently that there were

quicker ways to die. In New York, the subway generally got you where you needed to go, but you had to endure a lot. For example, by the end of her first month the woman had already seen someone pee in the corner of a car. She had been solicited for money numerous times. And, if she didn't have money, the same person would ask her for food or a pencil or a tissue to wipe his nose. On a trip into Brooklyn on the L, she had almost been kicked in the face by a pole-dancing kid. She'd refused to give that kid any money.

You worry too much, the man said whenever she brought up the fact that she still didn't feel quite at home in New York. And not only did she not feel at home; she felt that she was constantly in danger.

You exaggerate, the man replied.

At the restaurant, he gave the woman a look of his own. This look said two things: one, you worry too much, and, two, this is fun—I'm having fun, now you have fun.

The woman *was* having fun, but she also didn't want to get food poisoning.

As if having read her mind, the man said, If you do get sick, you can blame me.

Eventually, the waitress noticed that the couple had arrived. She had been picking polish off her nails. She looked up but didn't get up and instead waved them to the bar. Sit anywhere you like, she said sleepily. Then she disappeared behind a black curtain embroidered with the Chinese character for the sun.

**W**hen they first started dating, they'd agreed that if there weren't any glaring red flags, and there weren't, they would try to live together, and they did. To make things fair, each tried to find a job in the other's city. Not surprisingly, the demand for financial analysts in New York was much higher than the demand for pottery instructors in Boston.

Huzzah, he texted the day the movers arrived at her old apartment. She texted back a smiley face, then, later, pictures of her empty living room, bedroom, bathroom, and the pile of furniture and things she was donating so that, once they were living together, they would not have, for example, two dining-room sets, twenty

pots and pans, seven paring knives, and so on.

She was one of those people—the kind to create an Excel spreadsheet of everything she owned and send it to him, so that he could then highlight what he also owned and specify quantity and type, since it might make sense to have seven paring knives if they were of different thicknesses and lengths and could pare different things.

He was one of these people—the kind to look at an Excel spreadsheet and squint.

Before the big move, she had done some research on the best time to drive into the city in a large moving truck. She did not want to take up too much space. It would pain her if the moving truck was responsible for a blocked intersection and a mess of cars honking non-stop. The Internet said that New Yorkers were tough and could probably handle anything. But the Internet also said, To avoid the angriest of New Yorkers during rush hour, try 5 A.M. When she arrived at 5 A.M., he was waiting for her in the lobby of his building, with a coffee, an extra sweatshirt, and a very enthusiastic kiss. After the kiss, he handed her a set of keys. There were four in total: one for the building, one for the trash room, one for the mailbox, one for their apartment door. Because all the keys looked the same, he said that it might take her a month to figure out which was which, but it took her only a day. She was happy that he was happy. She would frequently wonder, but never ask, if he had looked for a job as diligently as she had.

**I**ll just have water, the man said, when the waitress gave them each a cup of hot tea. It was eight degrees outside, and the waitress explained that the tea, made from barley, was intentionally paired with the Pacific oyster, which was the first course of the omakase. The waitress looked no older than eighteen. She was Asian, with a diamond nose stud and a purple lip ring. When talking to her, the woman could only stare at the ring and bite her own lip. The woman was also Asian (Chinese), and seeing another Asian with facial piercings reminded her of all the things she had not been able to get away with as a kid. Her immigrant



*"So is this the fun part, or will there be even bigger bugs sticking to my face soon?"*

parents had wanted the best for her, so imagine coming home to them with a lip ring. First, her parents would have made her take the ring out, then they would have slapped her, then they would have reminded her that a lip ring made her look like a hoodlum and in this country not everyone would give someone with an Asian face the benefit of the doubt. If she looked like a hoodlum, then she would have trouble getting into college. If she couldn't get into college, then she couldn't get a job. If she couldn't get a job, then she couldn't enter society. If she couldn't enter society, then she might as well go to jail. Ultimately, a lip ring could only land her in jail—what other purpose did it serve? She was not joining the circus. She was not part of an indigenous African tribe. She was not Marilyn Manson. (Her father, for some strange reason, knew who Marilyn Manson was and listened to him and liked him.) Then, in jail, she could make friends with other people wearing lip rings and form a gang. Is that what you want as a career? her parents would have asked. To form a lip-ring gang in jail? And she would have answered no.

Tea it is, the man said. He smiled

at the pretty waitress. She *was* pretty. The purple lip ring matched the purple streak in her hair, which matched the purple nail polish. Nevertheless, the man complimented the waitress's unremarkable black uniform. The waitress returned the favor by complimenting the man's circular eyeglass frames.

Oh, these silly things, the man said, lifting his glasses off his nose for a second.

They're not silly, the waitress said matter-of-factly. They're cool. My boyfriend couldn't pull those off. He doesn't have the head shape for it.

If the man lost interest, he didn't show it. If anything, knowing that the pretty waitress had a boyfriend only made the flirtation more fun.

Kids now are so different, the woman thought. She hadn't had a boyfriend until college. She wasn't this bold until after grad school. But the waitress might not have immigrant parents. Perhaps her parents were born here, which would mean different expectations, or parenting so opposed to the way they had been brought up by their own strict immigrant parents that there were basically no expectations. Another possibility: the waitress might have been adopted. In which case all bets were

off. Kids now were not only different but lucky, the woman thought. She wanted to say to the waitress, You have no idea how hard some of us worked so that you could dye your hair purple and pierce your lip.

The man nudged the woman, who was sitting next to him like a statue.

You're staring, he said. The waitress had noticed, too, and huffed off.

The mugs that the tea came in were handleless. The tea was so hot that neither of them could pick up the handleless mug comfortably. They could only blow at the steam, hoping that the tea would cool, and comment to each other on how hot it was. Until now, the sushi chef had not said a word to the couple. But it seemed to irritate him as he prepared the Pacific oyster (which turned out to be delicious) to see them not drink the tea.

This is the Japanese way, he finally said. He reached over the bar for the woman's mug. He then held the mug delicately at the very top with two fingertips and a thumb. The other hand was placed under the mug like a saucer. This is the Japanese way, he said again. He handed the mug back to the woman. The couple tried to mimic the chef, but perhaps their skin was thinner than his; holding the mug the Japanese way didn't hurt any less than sticking their hands into boiling water. The man put his mug down. The woman, however, did not want to offend the chef and held her mug until she felt her hands go numb.

Now that the man knew the chef could speak English, he tried to talk to him.

What kind of mug is this? he asked. It looks handmade. The glaze is magnificent. Then the man turned to the woman and pointed out how the green-blue glaze of their mugs seemed to differ. The layering, he said, was subtly thicker and darker in this part of her mug than in his.

Hmm, the woman said. To her, a mug was a mug.

It's a yunomi, isn't it? he said to the chef. Taller than it is wide, handleless. Yes, handleless, with a trimmed foot. Used in traditional tea ceremonies.

The chef looked suspiciously at the man. Maybe he was wondering if the



man was fucking with him, as people sometimes did when they encountered a different culture and, in an effort to tease, came off as incredibly earnest, only to draw information out of the person they were teasing until the person looked foolish.

He's a potter, the woman said.

The man quickly turned to her as if to say, Why did you just do that? We were having so much fun. Then he began to laugh, leaning back and almost falling off the barstool. I'm sorry, he said to the chef. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. The mug is beautiful, and you should be proud to have something like this in your kitchen. I would be.

The chef said thank you and served them their first piece of fish on similarly green-blue ceramic plates that the man promised not to scrutinize.

Enjoy, the chef said, and gave them a steady thumbs-up.

The man responded with his own thumbs-up.

The woman liked how easily the man handled everything. He never took anything too seriously. He was a natural extrovert. By now, the woman knew that, although he worked alone in his studio, he not only enjoyed the company of others but needed it. When out, he talked to anyone and everyone. Sometimes it was jokey talk, the kind he was having with the sushi chef. Sometimes it was playful banter, the kind he had with the pretty waitress. The flirting didn't bother the woman. Instead, it made her feel good that the man was desired. While he was not handsome, he had a friendly face and rosy cheeks. The word "wholesome" came to mind. He was someone who could have just stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting.

Their first official date had been on Skype. It had consisted of each of them drinking a bottle of wine and watching the same movie on their respective laptops. He suggested "House of Flying Daggers," and she said that she was O.K. with watching something else. Maybe something that wasn't so overtly Chinese and, no offense to the talented Zhang Yimou, so old-school.

What do you mean, "old-school"? he had asked.

I mean Tang dynasty, she had said.

She was fine with watching something more mainstream, set in modern day, with story lines about non-Asians. She didn't need the man to make her feel comfortable, if that was, in fact, what he was trying to do.

But it's a critically acclaimed movie, he'd replied.

So they ended up watching "House of Flying Daggers." The entire movie was in Chinese, with English subtitles. As they got progressively tipsier, the man asked the woman if the subtitles were all correct. I guess, the woman said, even though she understood only half of what was said and was reading the English herself. The man knew much more about Wuxia than she did. He also knew much more about the Tang dynasty, especially the pottery. During that dynasty, the Chinese had perfected color glazes. Most famously, they had perfected the tricolored glaze, which is a combination of green, yellow, and white. He even said the Chinese word for it, *sancai*, and she was a little shocked. No, she was a lot shocked. You would know the glaze if you saw it, he said once the movie was over and the wine had been drunk. The next day, he sent her a picture of a Tang-dynasty camel with *sancai* glaze. It was the same camel that had sat next to her mother's fireplace for the past twenty-five years.

The woman asked some of her friends. Most of them were Asian, but



she had a few non-Asian friends as well. A red flag? She did not want to continue with this man if he was interested in her only because she was Chinese. She had heard of these men, especially the kind you met on the Internet. She had heard of "yellow fever." She didn't like that it was called yellow fever. To name a kind of attraction after a disease carried by mosquitoes that killed one out of four people se-

verely infected said something about the attraction. Her closest friends told her that she was doing what she did best, overthinking and picking out flaws where there weren't any, hence the reason she was still single at thirty-six. As a potter, the man would obviously know about the history of pottery. And he probably just liked "House of Flying Daggers" as a movie. One of her non-Asian friends said, He's a guy and probably just thinks martial arts are cool. One of her Asian friends said, He probably just wants to impress you.

We'll see, she replied.

For their next Skype date, he suggested a romantic comedy set in England. The following week, an American action film. The next week, a Russian spy drama. After watching, they chatted first about the movie and then about other things. He told her that he had been in a few serious relationships, the most recent of which ended a year ago. What was she like? the woman asked, but really just wanted to know if she was Chinese. The man said that she was nice, though a little neurotic. But what was she like? the woman asked again, and the man said, What do you mean? She was Jewish and tall. He didn't suggest watching a Chinese movie again. When they visited each other, they ate not at Chinese places but at French, Italian, and Japanese restaurants. She was excited that he was turning out to be a regular guy. He met most of her friends, who afterward found a way to tell her how lucky she was to have met someone like him: single, American—an artist, no less—and her age. By "American," some of her Asian friends also meant "white," the implication being that she was somehow climbing the social ladder. She hadn't thought any of these things before, but now she did. Or maybe she had thought all of these things before and was just now admitting to them. Eventually, the woman felt comfortable enough to ask the man why he had picked "House of Flying Daggers" for their first date. The answer he gave was even less profound than what her friends had said. It was a random choice, he explained. That day, the movie had popped up on his browser as something that he might be interested in watching. It

was critically acclaimed, he said again.

So it was settled. The big question of why he was dating her was out of the way. Her Chineseness was not a factor. They were merely one out of a billion or so Asian girl–white guy couples walking around on this earth.

The sushi chef worked quickly with his hands, and the woman couldn't help but be mesmerized. From a giant wooden tub of warm rice he scooped out two tiny balls. He molded the balls into elongated dollops. Then he pressed a slice of fish on top of the rice using two fingers, the index and middle, turning the nigiri in the palm of his hand as if displaying a shiny toy car. As a final touch, he dipped a delicate brush into a bowl of black sauce and lightly painted the top of the car. For certain pieces, he wrapped a thin strip of nori around the nigiri. For others, he left the fish slices on a small grill to char. The woman was impressed. This chef looked as though he belonged at the Four Seasons or the Mandarin Oriental. Between courses, he wiped down his cooking station and conversed with them. He spoke softly, which meant that the couple had to listen carefully and not chew too loudly. The man told the chef that they lived only a few blocks away. The chef lived in Queens but was originally from Tokyo. The man said that he had seen the chef working here before. The chef said that that was impossible. The man insisted that he had. He said that he walked by this restaurant every day on the way back from his studio, and though he had never come in, he peeked inside every now and then and saw a chef—you, he said—working diligently behind the bar.

The chef chuckled and said, That's impossible.

Why do you say impossible? the man asked.

Because this is my first day working here.

Oh, the man said, but, refusing to admit that he had been wrong, pushed on. He asked if the restaurant was a family-run business. He might not have seen the chef, as in *you*, but he might have seen a brother or a friend. And surely the chef must have come in for an interview. Perhaps when he peeked in that day the chef was actually there, learning the ropes from the previous

chef, who might have been the brother or the friend. At this point, the woman put a hand on the man's thigh.

The chef chuckled again, longer and louder than before. He looked at the woman, and she felt herself unable to meet his gaze. It was not a family-run business, he clarified. He did not know the previous chef. He had been hired yesterday and had interviewed by phone.

The man finally let the topic slide, and the woman was relieved. If he'd continued, she would have had to say something. She would have had to explain to the man (in a roundabout way) that he sounded insensitive, assuming that the chef he'd seen in the window was this chef and then assuming that the chefs could have been brothers. The roundabout way would have to involve a joke—something like Oh-don't-think-all-of-us-look-the-same—and the man would have laughed and the woman would have laughed and the chef would have chuckled. It would have to be said as a joke, because the woman knew that the man hadn't meant to seem insensitive; he had just wanted to be right. Also, the woman didn't want to make a big deal out of nothing. She didn't want to be one of those women who noted every teeny tiny thing and racialized it. And wasn't it something that she and her closest Asian friends joked about, too—that, if you considered how people are typically described, by the color of their hair and their eyes, it did sound as though they all looked the same?

But joking about this with her friends was different from joking with the man.

For a moment, the woman felt a kinship with the chef, but the moment passed.

After the couple had finished their tea, the waitress came back and started them on a bottle of unfiltered sake. She still seemed miffed from earlier. She spoke only to the man, explaining that the nigori had herbal notes and hints of chrysanthemum. The woman tossed back her sake and couldn't taste either. The man hovered his nose over his cup for a long minute and said that he could smell subtle hints of something.

Alcohol? the woman said.

Something else.

Chrysanthemum?

Something else.

The woman wanted to add that perhaps what the man was smelling was bullshit, because the waitress was clearly making everything up. How the woman knew was that she had read the back of the bottle, which said the sake had a fruity nose with hints of citrus.

What's wrong with me? the woman thought. She was getting riled up over nothing. This was nothing. The man leaned over and rubbed a finger under her chin. She felt better, but not entirely right. The chef smiled at them while slicing two thin pieces of snapper.

When enough time had passed, the man began chatting with the chef again. He was curious, he said. The sushi was delicious, and he was wondering where the chef had worked before. He must have had years of experience. It showed. Speaking on behalf of both of them, the man continued, he hadn't had omakase like this in years and they went to some of the best places in the city.

Like where? the chef asked.

The man listed the places, and the chef nodded in approval and the man beamed. The woman felt a need to interject. Many of these omakase places had been her suggestion. To be honest, when they first started dating the man knew what omakase was but had never tried it. He said the opportunity had never come up, and the woman wondered if this was code for I didn't know how to go about it, I didn't want to look like an idiot if I went in and ordered wrong. So, for one of their early in-person dates she had taken him to a place in Boston. She knew the chef, who was Chinese. Many Chinese chefs turned to Japanese food, as it was significantly classier and more lucrative. She spoke with the Chinese chef in Chinese about the Japanese omakase, an experience that she would not have known how to describe to her parents, who had been taught to loathe the Japanese, or her grandparents, who had lived through the Sino-Japanese War and did loathe the Japanese. Thankfully, that history was not part of the woman's identity. She had grown up in the States. She felt no animosity toward Japanese people, culture, or food. Anyway, the point was that, when she'd visited the man in New York, she had



## THE GURNEY

Because the gurney is unattended  
in the hallway outside my father's room,  
because nobody is guarding its bright metal rails  
or its silver tongue shrouded with a woollen blanket,  
because the blanket is a faded shade  
of red currant—now bitter, now sweet—  
because the hallway is empty  
of everything but soothing lemon wallpaper  
and the eucalypt sting of disinfectant,  
I am almost beside it before I see  
the unmistakable topography of a body—  
troughs and peaks, a rough silhouette  
as though earth is piled up there, underneath.  
The hairs on my arms rise stiffly  
like the prickling pelt of a nettle leaf,  
and as if I have suddenly held copper  
wire to current I am seized  
with an uncontrollable shudder  
summoned from some primordial place  
behind the daylight mind. Mortal voice, speak.  
*Don't move*, I want to say, *I'll get somebody*—  
but I do not know to whom I am speaking,  
I do not know whose body I will raise,  
there is no helping what is beyond  
help, no speaking to what is beyond  
speech. My father's voice pipes from his room—  
a rising inflection that means he is arguing  
with the nurse about his medication—  
and I am woozy, ecstatic: this body is not  
his, he is still wrapped in his voice, if I shook him  
he would rattle with it, it would spear  
from him like a germinating seed,  
the green pellet of it spiking open,  
rolling his life out on gimballing wheels.

—Sarah Holland-Batt

looked up the places he had just listed. She had taught the man that, in Japanese, “omakase” means “I leave it up to you.” There was one more thing. She had paid. Not always but most of the time, especially at the more expensive places. And it made sense for her to pay. She earned more, and trying omakase together had become one of their things. She liked that they had things.

There was also that place in Boston, the woman interjected. Remember? The one I took you to. The first time you had omakase. While she was saying this, the woman wondered if she was being too defensive, but she said it anyway.

Of course, the man said without glancing at her. So where did you work again? he asked the chef.

A restaurant downtown, he said. He then gave the name, but it was not one that either the man or the woman recognized.

You might not know it, he said. It was a very exclusive place. Very fancy. We didn't open every day. We opened only by reservation. And to make a reservation you had to call a specific number that wasn't listed, that was only passed by word of mouth. When you called, you asked to speak with the manager. The manager had to know you, or else he would say

you'd called the wrong number and hang up.

You're kidding, the man said. Then he looked at the woman and asked if she'd heard that.

She had heard it. The chef wasn't whispering. The man leaned over the bar, so that his upper body was now above the trays of nori and the bowl of sauce. He was leaning on his elbows, like a little boy waiting for a treat from his mother in the kitchen. Adorable, the woman noted, and momentarily felt fine again.

So I'm guessing you got tired of that, the man said. Dealing with all those rich folks.

No.

It was probably the stress. I bet a place like that made you work terrible hours. All those private parties. People who have nothing better to do with their money.

No.

And not being able to make whatever you wanted. What the customer wants the customer gets. A place that exclusive, you probably got some strange requests.

Yes, but that's not the reason I was fired.

Fired?

The man looked even more interested. Did you hear that? he said to the woman. To him, if a high-class chef had been fired that meant that the chef had a rogue streak, which was something the man tended to respect. Also, he was getting drunk. The sake bottle was empty, and the waitress had brought another.

Fired for what? the man asked. He offered the chef a cup of sake, but the chef declined.

The woman turned her own cup in her hands and stared at the wall behind the chef, which had a painting of a giant wave about to crush three tiny boats. The woman liked the fact that she and the man worked in completely different fields. It meant that there was very little competition between them, and what they had in common was something genuine. The man had no interest in money, and that fascinated her. He seemed a free spirit, but how was he still alive today if he didn't care about money? She, on the other hand, was much more

concerned about money and where it came from. She liked her job, but she liked it most because it was stable and salaried. Although she could not say those things to the man, who sometimes said to his friends, Bankers, when she made practical remarks about how they were going to split the check. After he said that, he did one of those comical eye rolls to show everyone that he was kidding. It was funny. She laughed along. But later, when she asked him why he did that, he would put a hand on her head and say that she was overthinking it. He was only teasing her because he was so proud of her. She did something he couldn't in a million years do. Numbers, graphs—just hearing her on the phone made his head spin, but the work was clearly important and necessary. And you're able to do this because, well, let's face it, you're smarter than me. The man had said that. When he said it, the woman felt a happy balloon rise from her stomach to her mouth.

Fired for what?

The chef didn't answer. Instead, he washed his hands, which were now covered in red slime, and picked up a blowtorch to sear the skin of a nearby salmon.

A year into dating, she had taken the man to meet her parents. They lived in a cookie-cutter suburb in Springfield, Massachusetts. Her father worked for a company that designed prosthetic limbs. Her mother was a housewife. Back in China, they'd had different jobs. Her father had been a computer-science professor and her mother had been a salesclerk, but their success in those former roles had hinged on being loquacious and witty in their native language, none of which translated into English. Every now and then, her father went out for academic jobs and would make it as far as the interview stage, at which point he had to teach a class. He would dress as sharply as he could. He would prepare careful notes. Then, during class, the only question he was asked, usually by a clownish kid in the back row, was whether he

could please repeat something. Her mother took a job at JCPenney but eventually quit. In China, an efficient salesclerk followed customers from place to place like a shadow, but no one wanted her mother to do that at JCPenney. In fact, her mother was frequently reported for looking like a thief. Nevertheless, her parents were now comfortable in their two-thousand-square-foot house, which had a plastic mailbox and resembled everyone else's. Perhaps her parents liked the sameness of suburban houses because, from the outside, you couldn't tell that a Chinese family lived inside. Not that her parents were ashamed of being Chinese, and they had taught their daughter not to be ashamed, either. You are just as good as anyone else, they'd told her, even before she realized that this was a thought she was supposed to have.

The woman did not know how her parents would react. She had brought home other boyfriends, and the reception had been lukewarm. The man was the first boyfriend she had brought home in a long time. Unfortunately, that made the question of race even harder to answer, as he was also the first white boyfriend she had brought home. So, were her parents being welcoming out of relief that their daughter wouldn't become a spinster or out of surprise that she, as her friends pointed out, had got lucky? As with

every complex question in life, it was probably a mixture of both. But was it a fifty-fifty mix or a twenty-eighty one, and, if the latter, which was the eighty and which was the twenty?

Throughout the weekend, the woman felt feverish. Her brain was in overdrive. She watched the man help her mother bring in groceries and

then help her father shovel the driveway. She was in disbelief when her father went out and came back with a bottle of whiskey. She didn't know that he drank whiskey. She then had to recalculate the fifty-fifty ratio to take into account the whiskey. For each meal, her mother set out a pair of chopsticks and also cutlery. When the man chose the chopsticks, her parents smiled at him

as if he were a clever monkey who had put the square peg into the square hole.

That he could use chopsticks correctly elicited another smile, even a clap. Then they complimented him on everything, from the color of his hair down to the color of his shoes.

The woman was glad that her parents were being nice, as it dispelled the cliché of difficult Asian parents. Previously she had explained to the man that her parents had a tendency to be cold, but the coldness was more a reflex from years of being underdogs than their natural state. When her parents turned out not to be cold at all, the woman was glad, but then she wondered why they hadn't been more difficult. Why hadn't her father been more like a typical American dad and greeted the man at their cookie-cutter door with a cookie-cutter threat?

By the end of the weekend, her mother had pulled her aside to say that she should consider moving to New York. The man had thrown the idea out there, and the woman didn't know how to respond.

I'm not sure yet, she told her mother. But we're going to look for jobs in both places.

Her mother nodded and said, Good. Then she reminded the woman that a man like that wouldn't wait around forever.

For their last piece of omakase, the chef presented them with the classic tamago egg on sushi rice. The egg was fluffy and sweet. How was that? the chef asked. He asked this question after every course, with his shoulders slumped forward, and their response—that it was the best tamago egg on sushi rice they'd ever had—pushed his shoulders back like a strong wind.

The Japanese way, the woman thought. Or perhaps the Asian way. Or perhaps the human way.

Dessert was two scoops of mocha ice cream. For the remainder of the meal, the man kept asking the chef why he'd been fired. Another bottle of sake had arrived.

It's nothing interesting, the chef said.

I doubt that, the man said. Come on. We're all friends here.

Though neither he nor the woman knew the chef's name, and vice versa.





During the meal, no one else had come into the restaurant. People had stopped by the window and looked at the menu but had moved on.

Management, the chef finally said. He was done making sushi and had begun to clean the counter. He would clean the counter and wash his rag. Then he would clean the counter again.

His purpose wasn't to clean anymore, the woman decided. It was to look as if he had something to do while he told the story.

What happened? she asked. At this point, she might as well know.

I was fired three weeks ago, the chef said. The manager had booked a party of fifty for a day that I was supposed to have off. Then he called me in. I initially said no, but the party was for one of our regulars. I said I couldn't serve a party of fifty on my own and he would need to call in backup. He said O.K., and an hour later I showed up. But there was no backup, just me. The manager was Chinese, and said that he had called other chefs but no one had come.

The chef stopped cleaning for a moment to wash his rag. I'm not an idiot, he continued. I knew that was a lie. So I only made sushi for two people. I refused to make sushi for the other forty-eight, and eventually the entire party left.

Bold, the man said.

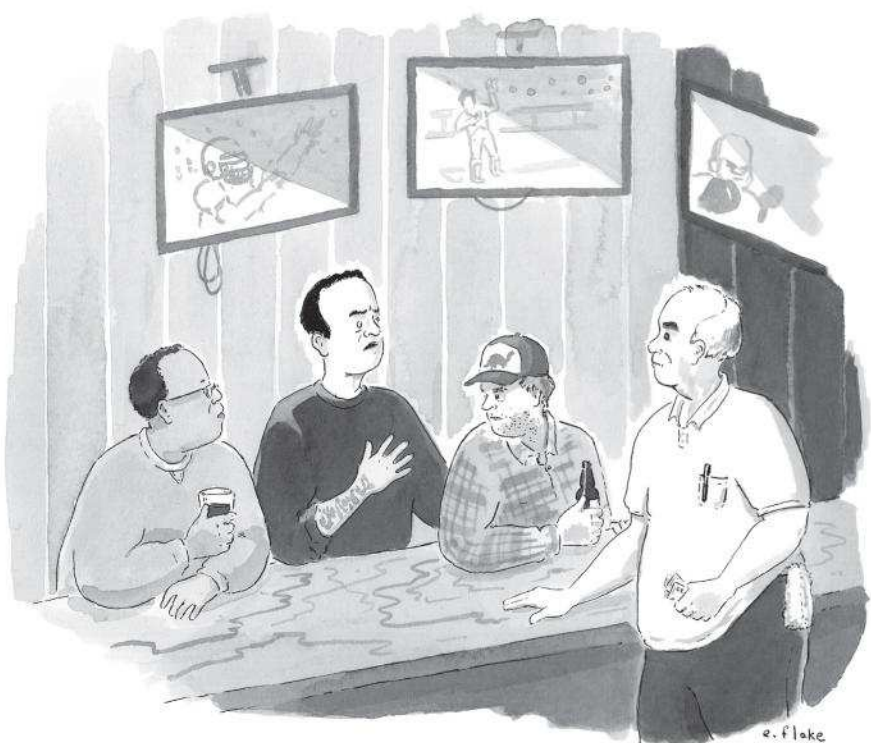
The woman didn't say anything. There was a piece of egg stuck between her molars and she was trying to get it out with her tongue. When she couldn't, she used a finger. She stuck her finger into the back of her mouth. Then she wiped the piece of egg—no longer yellow and fluffy but white and foamy—on her napkin.

I'm Chinese, the woman said reflexively, the way her parents might have.

The chef went back to cleaning his counter. The man cleared his throat. He said, not specifically to the woman or the chef but to an invisible audience, That's not what the chef meant.

I know, the woman said. She was looking at the man. I know that's not what he meant. I just wanted to put it out there. I don't mean anything by it, either.

The man rolled his eyes and a spike of anger went through the woman. Or maybe two spikes. She imagined taking two toothpicks and sticking them through the man's pretty eyes to stop



*"I'm just sayin'—seventeen TVs in this joint and you can't turn one to the dressage championship?"*

them from rolling. Then she imagined making herself a very dry Martini with a skewer of olives.

Sorry, the chef said. He was now rearranging the boxes of sesame seeds and bonito flakes. He was smiling but not making eye contact. In a moment, he would start humming and the woman would not be able to tell if he was sorry for what he'd said or sorry that she was Chinese. A mix of both? She wanted to ask which one it was, or how much of each, but then she would sound insane. She didn't want to sound insane, yet she also didn't want to be a quiet little flower. So there she was, saying nothing but oscillating between these two extremes. In truth, what could she say? The chef was over sixty years old. And the Chinese, or so she'd heard, were the cheapest of the cheap.

The man never called her sweetheart. Sweetheart, he said, I think you've had enough to drink. Then he turned to the chef. Time to go, methinks.

The chef spoke only to the waitress after that. He called her over to help the couple settle the bill. The woman put her credit card down while the man

pretended not to notice. She tipped her usual twenty per cent.

What was that? the man said once they were outside. It had got colder. It would take them fifteen minutes to walk home.

I'm not mad at him, the woman said.

And you shouldn't be. He was just telling a story.

Again, I'm not mad at him.

The man understood. They walked in silence for a while before he said, Look, I wasn't the one who told the story and you have to learn not to take everything so personally. You take everything so personally.

Do I?

Also, you have to be a little more self-aware.

Aware of what?

The man sighed.

Aware of what?

The man said, Never mind. Then he put a hand on her head and told her to stop overthinking it. ♦

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Weike Wang on the privilege of not having to think about race.

# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## HIGH CRIMES

*Bill Clinton pens a thriller, sort of.*

BY ANTHONY LANE

Collaboration is a murky trade, and it covers quite a range. Whether you're siding with the enemy in Nazi-occupied France or laying out the lyrics to "Edelweiss" so that Richard Rodgers can devise a tune to match, you're a collaborator. But no joining of forces is more difficult to fathom than the partnership between two writers. Writing, like dying, is one of those things that should be done alone or not at all. In each case, loved ones may hover around and tender their support, but, in the end, it's up to you. So, when two writers decide to merge, what do they actually *do*?

Well, I've heard rumors of novelist couples who produce alternate chapters: one for you, one for me. A tidy scheme for twin souls but otherwise, assuredly, a prelude to divorce. Also, how can you guarantee that the cracks won't show between your styles? John Fletcher, a popular and gifted playwright, once hooked up with some old slacker named Shakespeare to bring us "Henry VIII," which was first performed in 1613, and linguistic analysis can propose, scene by scene, who delivered which slices of the cake. (Fletcher, who liked to get by with a little help from his friends, later conjured a play with *three* other writers. I bet that was peaceful.) Even so, nobody is sure about the sequence of events—whether Fletcher rounded off what Shakespeare couldn't be bothered to complete, or whether the play was genuinely conceived in perfect harmony, with one guy sitting on the other's lap, their fingers interlaced around the quill.

All of which brings us to another famous William. Bill Clinton, who can write, has hooked up with James Patterson, who can't, but whose works have sold more than three hundred and seventy-five million copies, most of them to happy and contented customers for whom good writing would only get in the way. This unlikely pact has resulted in "The President Is Missing" (Knopf and Little, Brown), which we must, not without reservations, describe as a thriller. Get a load of this: "The stun grenades detonate, producing a concussive blast of 180 decibels." A hundred and eighty, mark you, and not a decibel less! If that isn't thrilling, I can't imagine what is.

The book itself is a concussive blast of five hundred and thirteen pages. Though not as massive as "My Life" (2004), Clinton's autobiography, which was twice as long, it's a welcome return to bulk after his slender offerings of recent years—"Giving: How Each of Us Can Save the World" (2007) and "Back to Work: Why We Need Smart Government for a Strong Economy" (2011). Neither of these volumes, it is fair to say, was a thriller. Both contained plenty of sage advice but were scandalously short of car chases, eruptive fireballs, and missile-bearing helicopters, and that is where the new book has the edge: "The Viper arrives, firing another Hellfire and completely incinerating the attack boat." The world *is* saved, not by giving, still less by economic strength, but by the efforts of one man. Guess who.

Jon Duncan is the President of the United States, "fifty years old and rusty."

The events in the novel are designed to put the shine back on. Duncan is, by his own account, "a war hero with rugged good looks and a sharp sense of humor," not to mention a beguiling modesty. He served in Operation Desert Storm, in Iraq, where he was wounded. He is also a former governor of North Carolina. His wife died not long ago, and now it's just him and his daughter: the exact situation, as it happens, that confronted Michael Douglas in "The American President," Rob Reiner's 1995 movie, a direct precursor of "The West Wing." The President in *that* show, played by Martin Sheen, suffered from multiple sclerosis, and Duncan, too, has a medical burden, grave yet controllable, to bear: immune thrombocytopenia, which means that his blood won't clot as it should, and which leaves him with bruising on the legs. His physician warns that he could have a stroke at any moment, especially if he is under stress.

Cue the stress. Duncan is facing possible impeachment, partly because his opponents are careerist weasels but mainly because, according to leaked reports, he held a telephone conversation with "the most dangerous and prolific cyberterrorist in the world," Suliman Cindoruk, who leads an organization known as Sons of Jihad. ("He's Turkish-born, but he's not Muslim," Duncan says. That faint sound you can hear is our two authors treading very, very carefully.) Now, if the opening chapter is to be trusted, Duncan is to answer for this bizarre and perhaps treasonable lapse in front of a House Select Committee, many of

ABOVE: CLOE FLOIRAT





*Clinton's unlikely collaboration with James Patterson yields mysteries, thrills, and a topdressing of moral rumination.*

ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY BLITT

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whose members pine for his fall from grace. “They can impeach me for anything they want,” Duncan remarks. “It doesn’t have to be a crime.” A nice line, which, depending on your point of view, either glances back at President Clinton’s own tribulations, in his second term, or peers ahead to the putative deposing of Donald Trump.

Another problem: a female assassin is in the offing. We are as yet unaware of her targets, but she’s no ordinary killer, for every aspect of her craft is tinged with Johann Sebastian Bach, including her weapon of choice: “Anna Magdalena is a thing of beauty, a matte-black semiautomatic rifle.” Let us hope that her passions last for two and a half hours, preferably in the company of a hunk named Mr. Goldberg. But she’s not the only incoming threat. There are also a couple of computer wonks, motives unclear: the first, “a cross between a Calvin Klein model and a Eurotrash punk rocker,” if you can picture such a creature; the second, a frightened fellow who arranges a covert meeting with the President at Nationals Park. Nail-gnawing stuff. No wonder Duncan dreams of sitting there in the stadium, crisis-free, with a hot dog and a beer. And he knows which beer, too: “At a ball game, there is no finer beverage than an ice-cold Bud,” he says to himself. Not since Daniel Craig practically ruined “Casino Royale” by pimping his watch to Eva Green (“Rolex?” “Omega.” “Beautiful”) has a product been placed with such unblushing zeal.

The reason Duncan can attend the game, alone, is that he’s wearing a Nationals cap, plus thickened eyebrows and spectacles. Aided by this impenetrable disguise, he slips out of the White House and, bereft of a security detail, goes on the lam. Hence the title of this book. The notion that the Commander-in-Chief could be elusive, camouflaged, or absent without leave is a promising one—“Dave” (1993), starring Kevin Kline, mined it for comic value—and it’s odd to see how little attention Patterson and Clinton (who may sometimes have prayed that *he* could go missing) pay to their main conceit. You’d think that such a vanishing act would raise an unrelenting hue and cry, but the media aspect is

scarcely touched upon, and the entire novel has an air of narrative lockdown, with Duncan seldom interacting with anyone beyond his immediate circle or his international peers, even after he has flown the official coop. His pronouncements, on the page, evince an ardent faith in government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but you badly want him to hang out *with* the people. Maybe all Presidents feel that way, and I believed in Duncan’s admission, at once touching and exasperated, on page 99: “I haven’t opened my own car door for a decade.” The fingerprints of Clinton are all over that line. So where else can we find him in this book?

Not in the sex, that’s for sure, because there ain’t any. I’ve looked. It will be the first thing, let’s face it, for which hostile readers will hunt, but the forty-second President of the United States is smart enough to give any hint of carnality the widest of berths. There are teasers, naturally, but they lead nowhere. “I uncurl the gooseneck stem of the microphone so that it is taut, fully extended,” Duncan says, as early as the fourth page, yet the goosing goes no further. Yes, the Bach-flavored assassin had a lover, but “she slept with him no more than three times a week to maximize his potency,” a regime that statisticians alone are likely to find arousing. Coders, similarly, are given something to moon over: “There is nothing so sexy as a good, destructive



overwrite.” Only once, in the entire novel, do two regular people come close to tossing aside all inhibitions and getting it on:

“Noya.” I give her a long hug, enjoying the comfort of her warm embrace.

“I could stay, Jonny,” she whispers in my ear.

Hot stuff, except that the huggee in question is the Prime Minister of Israel, with her “delicate, wrinkled

hands,” who’s about to board a Marine helicopter with the German Chancellor. She could indeed stay, though not in Duncan’s lonely bed. Not tonight.

In 2003, in downtown Little Rock, there was an exhibition devoted to Bill Clinton’s favorite books. It was solid fare, and doughtily unmodish. T. S. Eliot, Yeats, Orwell, Sophocles, and Marcus Aurelius were present, and also Reinhold Niebuhr (of whom Barack Obama, likewise, is a devotee). There was a face-off between biographies of Lincoln and Leopold II of Belgium. There was even something entitled “Living History,” by Hillary Rodham Clinton. How on earth did that make the cut? Then, last year, on Facebook, the former President issued a fresh roster of recommendations, this time with extra quirks: Oliver Sacks and Carly Simon, a book about the making of “High Noon,” and “House of Spies,” by the indefatigable Daniel Silva, whose recurrent leading man, over seventeen books, displays a knack for espionage, judicious homicide, and art restoration.

The literary diet that emerges from these lists, mixing disposable genre fiction with unrepentant classics and, for the most part, skipping the indigestibly middlebrow, is one that I happen to share. And, if you’d told me, in strictest confidence, that Clinton was now planning a novel, I would have wagered that mysteries and thrills, with a topdressing of moral rumination, would be on the menu. And so it proves.

Yet the puzzle remains: why James Patterson? Why not Daniel Silva? It’s understandable that Clinton, with limited time on his hands, might well scout for a partner; you really need a Sundance Kid, if you want to be a Butch. Clinton could have taken his pick from the ranks of American novelists, though whether Don DeLillo would have leaped at the chance is open to debate. Personally, I’d have plumped for Martin Cruz Smith, who has demonstrated, since the first two sentences of “Gorky Park” (1981), that the English language lies at his command, whereas Patterson is helplessly at its mercy, as even the briefest browse



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of his corpus will confirm. Still, what a corpus: almost two hundred books to date, of which sixty-six have headed the *Times* best-seller list. In 2016, *Forbes* estimated his net worth at around seven hundred million dollars, a sum that would have made even Marcus Aurelius ditch the Stoicism and buy a yacht. If Clinton, like all aspiring novelists, yearned for his book to sell, he chose the right wingman. It could be called “The President Is Cashing In.”

But the gods are just, and although they denied the gift of literary grace to Patterson, they bestowed on him an even rarer skill. As a collaborator, he’s the top. Barely can he sketch an outline without reaching for a sidekick. So numerous are his assistants that one has to ask, less in snotty disapproval than in ontological awe, how many of Patterson’s books are actually “his,” and to what extent he is a writer at all, as opposed to a trademark or a brand. Were he to unearth a distant ancestor, in cinquecento Florence, whose output is mostly attributed to “the workshop of Giacomo Paterfilio,” no one would be surprised.

Last year, in a splendid article in *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, Simon Fuller and James O’Sullivan applied stylometric analysis to a variety of Patterson’s texts—much as earlier scholars attempted to sift the Fletcher from the Shakespeare in “Henry VIII”—and reported that “Patterson’s collaborators perform the vast majority of the actual writing.” The article, far from deriding his approach, connects it to older habits of cultural production, recalling the auspicious stamp of authority in the phrase “Alfred Hitchcock Presents” and noting that Alexandre Dumas, in the mid-nineteenth century, ran what was basically an assembly line, staffed by lowly sub-scribes. Fuller and O’Sullivan conclude that Patterson’s oeuvre is “exemplary of the experience of leisure-time in late capitalism.” *Just* what I was thinking.

We are left, therefore, with a copy of “The President Is Missing” and a consuming question: who ghosted whom? Did Patterson supply the bones of the story, as is his wont, and Clinton tack on the flesh? Or did Pat-

erson reverse his usual process, merely tinkering and smoothing after Clinton, musing on his years in office, had brought forth a plot—in essence, his reverie of responsible power?

Whatever the ratio of their labors, one thing is certain: everything you expect from Patterson is here, unadulterated, right down to the ritual mixing of the metaphors—“She had to bite her tongue and accept her place as second fiddle,” say, or “the sorrowful, deer-in-the-headlights look is long gone. The gloves have come off.” Fauna, for some reason, bring out the very best in the makers of this book. The stealthy assassin, seeking a forest perch from which to shoot, has a Bambi moment: “Along the way, little animals bounce out of her path.” On a more rueful note, “Augie looks at me like a lost puppy, in a foreign place with no partner anymore, nothing to call his own except his smartphone.” So true, and so very sad. It’s not enough to give a dog a phone.

In short, not even an ex-President, for all his heft and influence, can mar the charms of so transcendent a technique, or curb its ability to suck us in. When Duncan tells us, “Adrenaline crashes through my body,” we are meant to get caught in the crash. It goes without saying that “The President Is Missing” is written in the present tense, or, to be accurate, in a specialist subset of that tense. Think of it as the hysteric present. “I grab my phone and dial my go-to guy.” “I hit the bottom of the stairs.” “I punch out the phone call and flip on the overhead light.” Who would not follow such a man, and heed his call? Make no mistake, though. If he needs to play dirty, he will: “I terminate the connection and walk out of the room.” You want dirtier? Duncan can do that, too: “I can get pretty creative with my cussing.” No shit.

What fascinates me, above all, are the people of Pattersonia, that fabled land where sentences go to die. Its inhabitants carry and express themselves like eager extraterrestrials who have completed all but one module of their human-conversion course: “Volkov’s eyebrows flare a bit.” Or “Augie lets out a noise that sounds like

laughter.” But isn’t. And what can you do with a line like “her face once again becomes a poker-face wall,” except revel in its delicious tautology? Time and again, the folks in this very peculiar novel indulge in gestures that would be difficult—and physically unwise—to emulate, even in the safety of your own home. “Carolyn tucks in her lips.” “Casey falls to a crouch, gripping her hair.” One character has “eyes in a focused squint,” a second performs “a sweeping nod,” while a third “shakes his head, hiccups a bitter chuckle.” As opposed to chuckling a bitter hiccup. That would be absurd.

Not that Duncan is immune, with his weirdly alien moves: “My head on a swivel, I focus on Devin.” Fie, his very locomotion is a riddle: “I break into a jog, something close to a full sprint.” Well, which is it, a sprint or a jog? A jig, maybe? Or a sprog? Whatever the case, it’s patently arduous, because, three pages later, the poor guy can’t stop puffing. “I blow out air, my nerves still jangled,” he says, temporarily transformed into a porpoise. And again, “My pulse banging, I take a breath.” The whole question of air, in fact, seems vital to both Patterson and Clinton, forever ruffling the pages of their busy book. If you can read a sentence like “The wind off the river lifts his hair,” for instance, without thinking of the current American President, you’re doing better than me. Duncan takes “one of the deepest breaths I’ve ever taken, sweet, delicious oxygen,” which is a relief to anybody who feared that he was giggling through this major emergency on helium. Most stirring of all is the emotional flatulence that blares out when the pressure is on: “A collective exhalation of air escapes from the room as the world’s foremost cyberops experts gasp in wonder at the empty screen.”

You can’t blame them for gasping, though, since the core of the book’s plot is technological, and the primary tool of aggression is not a warhead but a virus—not any old bug, mind you, but “a devastating stealth wiper virus,” initiated by a villain who wishes to “reboot the world.” This master plan may be timely and plausible, but I’m not altogether convinced that either Patterson or Clinton is, as yet,



a master of the vocabulary that this strand of the story demands. At one point, we are met by monkey emojis instead of prose, and at another by “a bunch of scrambled jumble,” a phrase that would not disgrace the poetry of Edward Lear. A computer, we learn, “changes from a black screen to fuzz, then a somewhat clear screen split in two.” Loveliest of all, and a reminder that both authors are revered senior citizens, is their desire to help those who are less digitally dexterous than themselves: “That word is *trending*, as they say on the Internet right now.”

Let’s be fair, though. Somehow, “The President Is Missing” rises above its blithely forgivable faults. It’s a go-to read. It maximizes its potency and fulfills its mission. There’s a twist or two of which Frederick Forsyth might be proud. So, if you want to make the most of your late-capitalist leisure-time, hit the couch, crack a Bud, punch the book open, focus your squint, and enjoy. Moreover, in two important respects, this novel is a dead ringer for “War and Peace.” First, there’s the cunning brevity of the chapters—a hundred and twenty-nine of them—that makes a long story zip by. And, second, there’s the chutzpah with which Clinton (Patterson, I would suggest, may have stepped aside at this stage) waits until the twilight of the novel and then, like Tolstoy, squares his shoulders and expounds, in fiction-free form, his politico-historical thoughts. The gloves come off the deer. It’s notionally Duncan who is speaking, addressing Congress, but we know whose noble words he is declaiming. “Today it’s ‘us versus them’ in America. Politics is little more than blood sport,” he warns. Yet the man does not despair. Things could improve. He still sees the city upon the hill. “I want the United States to be free and prosperous, peaceful and secure, and constantly improving for all generations to come.” Amen. ♦

#### Therein Lies a Tale Dept.

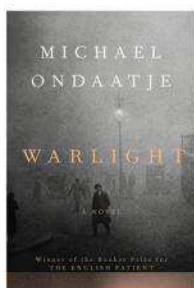
From the Associated Press.

A former meerkat expert at London Zoo has been ordered to pay compensation to a monkey handler she attacked with a wine glass in a love spat over a llama-keeper.

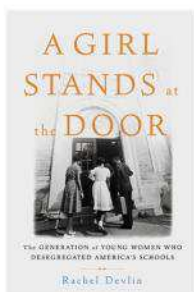
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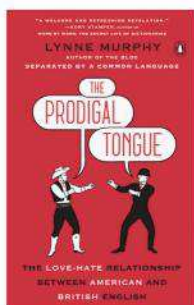
**Kudos**, by Rachel Cusk (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). In the final novel of a mordant trilogy, the narrator, Faye, a British writer, attends a literary festival in Europe. Her exchanges with complacent publishers, tedious journalists, and egotistical writers allow Cusk to eviscerate the characters for their ignorance—of themselves, of one another, and of the changing European political landscape post-Brexit. Literary-world foibles may be a tired subject, but the narrative brilliantly explores that very sense of fatigue, as illustrated in a speech delivered by Faye: “I said I wasn’t sure it mattered where people lived or how, since their individual nature would create its own circumstances: it was a risky kind of presumption, I said, to re-write your own fate by changing its setting.”



**Warlight**, by Michael Ondaatje (*Knopf*). This shadowy novel intertwines the experiences of a fourteen-year-old, Nathaniel, with British intelligence operations after the Second World War. When Nathaniel’s parents move from London to Singapore, for the father’s job, he and his sister stay behind, in the care of a near-stranger who introduces them to a network of part-time crooks and other eccentrics. Gradually, Nathaniel realizes that his parents may not be in Singapore after all, and, following an attack on the siblings, their mother reappears. Where has she been, and where is her husband? What caused the scars that now cover her arms? These questions follow Nathaniel into adulthood as he scrutinizes the past, trying to comprehend the “true map” of his mother’s life, and his own.



**A Girl Stands at the Door**, by Rachel Devlin (*Basic*). In 1936, a black man named Lloyd Gaines was denied admission to the University of Missouri School of Law because of his race. The N.A.A.C.P. successfully sued, but Gaines disappeared mysteriously. From then on, the N.A.A.C.P.’s search for promising plaintiffs in desegregation suits focussed on female volunteers. Devlin tells the stories of young women who were adept at the “high-wire act” required to endure a long and perilous process. Ada Lois Sipuel, who desegregated the University of Oklahoma College of Law, was praised for her “finesse” and “ready smile.” Patricia Black, who testified in a lawsuit against a segregated Kansas school district, later said that she was chosen because she had been taught “how to act in certain situations.”



**The Prodigal Tongue**, by Lynne Murphy (*Penguin Press*). The story of how the British and American forms of English came to be seen as foes, despite their underlying friendship, is told here with wry humo(u)r and scholarly acumen. History plays a role: after 1776, “rejecting the King’s English was another way to reject the King.” But despite the efforts of reactionaries—some British philologists advocated a return to Old English—and of spelling modernizers like Noah Webster, the lexicon remains our common property. The author, a scholar of linguistics, revels in the minutiae of spelling, grammar, and usage, and her love of our living, changing language is infectious. When we communicate, she writes, “we’re not robots. We’re poets.”

## THE STORY GOES

Ben Rhodes's *"The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House."*

BY GEORGE PACKER



*Over eight years, Rhodes's liberal idealism evolved into chastened pragmatism.*

Barack Obama was a writer before he became a politician, and he saw his Presidency as a struggle over narrative. "We're telling a story about who we are," he instructed his aide Ben Rhodes early in the first year of his first term. He said it again in his last months in office, on a trip to Asia—"I mean, that's our job. To tell a really good story about who we are"—adding that the book he happened to be reading argued for storytelling as the trait that distinguishes us from other primates. Obama's audience was both the American public and the rest of the world. His characteristic rhetorical mode was to describe and understand both sides of a divide—black and white, liberal and conservative, Muslim and non-Muslim—before synthesizing them into a unifying story that seemed to originate in and affirm his own.

At the heart of Obama's narrative was a belief that progress, in the larger scheme of things, was inevitable, and this belief underscored his position on every issue from marriage equality to climate change. His idea of progress was neither the rigid millennial faith of Woodrow Wilson nor Bush's shallow God-blessed optimism. It was human-scale and incremental. Temperamentally the opposite of zealous, he always acknowledged our human imperfection—his Nobel Peace Prize lecture was a Niebuhrian meditation on the tragic necessity of force in affairs of state. But, whatever the setbacks of the moment, he had faith that the future belonged to his expansive vision and not to the narrow, backward-pointing lens of his opponents.

This progressive story emerged in Obama's account of his own life, in his

policies, and in his speeches. Many of them were written by Rhodes, who joined the campaign as a foreign-policy speechwriter in mid-2007, when he was twenty-nine; rose to become a deputy national-security adviser; accompanied Obama on every trip overseas but one; stayed to the last day of the Presidency; and even joined the Obamas on the flight to their first post-Presidential vacation, in Palm Springs, wanting to ease the loneliness of their sudden return to private life. Today, Rhodes still works alongside Obama.

The journalistic cliché of a "mind meld" doesn't capture the totality of Rhodes's identification with the President. He came to Obama with an M.F.A. in fiction writing from New York University and a few years on the staff of a Washington think tank. He became so adept at anticipating Obama's thoughts and finding Obamaesque words for them that the President made him a top foreign-policy adviser, with a say on every major issue. Rhodes's advice mostly took the form of a continuous effort to understand and apply the President's thinking. His decade with Obama blurred his own identity to the vanishing point, and he was sensitive enough—unusually so for a political operative—to fear losing himself entirely in the larger story. Meeting Obama was a fantastic career opportunity and an existential threat.

In "The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House" (Random House), Rhodes shows no trace of the disillusionment that gave George Stephanopoulos's tale of Bill Clinton its bitter, gossipy flavor, or of the light irony that came to inflect Peggy Noonan's adoration of Ronald Reagan. More than any other White House memoirist, Rhodes is a creature of the man he served. When Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., went to work as a special assistant to John F. Kennedy, in 1961, he was a middle-aged Harvard professor, the author of eight books, and a Democratic Party intellectual. Schlesinger was a worshipful convert with serious blind spots about Kennedy, but he did warn the new President not to go ahead with the Bay of Pigs, persistently enough that Robert Kennedy told him to back off. It's impossible to imagine Rhodes giving Obama that kind of advice, or writing a book like "A Thousand Days," which



isn't so much a White House memoir as a history of the New Frontier.

What Rhodes lacks in critical distance he gains in unobtrusive proximity. He spent thousands of hours with Obama in the Oval Office, on board Air Force One, and inside "the Beast," the bulletproof Presidential limousine. "My role in these conversations, and perhaps within his presidency," Rhodes writes, "was to respond to what he said, to talk and fill quiet space—to test out the logic of his own ideas, or to offer a distraction." Although Rhodes took on important projects like normalizing relations with Cuba and building support for the Iran nuclear deal, his essential role was to be the President's mirror and echo. When Obama mused that Ray Charles's version of "America the Beautiful" should be the national anthem, Rhodes added, "They should play it before every game." Obama seems to have wanted his right-hand man to be smart, loyal, and unlikely to offer a serious challenge. Reserved and watchful himself, Rhodes provided just the level of low-key, efficient companionship that his boss needed. It's not surprising that the aide whose company Obama tolerated best was another writer.

This is the closest view of Obama we're likely to get until he publishes his own memoir. Rhodes's Obama is curious, self-contained, irritable, and witty, and Rhodes—sixteen years younger and six inches shorter—is his straight man. On a Presidential trip to Latin America in 2011, at the start of the NATO air campaign in Libya, Rhodes found himself cast as spokesman for a country at war. The stress—he's appealingly candid about the anxiety and self-doubt, as well as the arrogance, that went with his job—caused him to lose track of his razor. Obama noticed. "What, you can't even bother to shave?" the President chided him. "Pull yourself together. We have to be professional here." Rhodes wanted to plead that he was overtasked and underslept, but instead he used the rebuke to understand Obama better: "I realized that these little flashes were how he relieved some of the stress that he had to be feeling, and that being composed and professional—doing the job—was how he managed to take everything in stride. I hadn't just failed to shave; I'd deviated from his ethos of unflappability."

With a fine writer's sense, Rhodes in-

cludes, along with the important speeches and decisions of state, a quiet moment in which Obama, standing on a beach in Hawaii, points to a hill and says, "My mom used to come here every day and sit there looking out at the bay when she was pregnant with me. I've always thought that's one of the reasons why I have a certain calm." This ability to stand back from the passing frenzy and survey it at a distance was an intellectual strength and a political liability. More than any modern President, Obama had a keen sense of the limits of American power—and of his own. But it's hard to build a narrative around actions not taken, disasters possibly averted, hard realities accommodated. The story of what didn't happen isn't an easy one to tell.

What Rhodes conveys forcefully is the disdain that he and Obama shared for the reflexive hawkishness of the foreign-policy flock, the clichés of the establishment media, the usual Washington games. Even in the White House, they saw themselves as perpetual outsiders. This aversion to normal politics gave Obama's story its cleanness and inspiration, while leaving the progress he achieved fragile and vulnerable to rougher practitioners with fewer qualms about the business they were all in.

There were two moments during their ten years together when a gap opened up between the President and his aide. The first came at the start of Obama's second term, when the promises of the Arab Spring were unraveling. The second came with the election of a successor who pledged to dismantle everything Obama had stood for. In each case, Obama was forced into a reconsideration of his idea of progress, and Rhodes, a step or two behind, had to catch up. The drama of "The World as It Is" lies between these points.

After Rhodes, a New Yorker, witnessed the 9/11 attacks, he considered joining the Army but instead went to Washington to become a speechwriter at the Wilson Center, a foreign-policy think tank. He supported the Iraq War in order to be taken seriously by the older people around him—he was just twenty-five—but his staff work for the 9/11 Commission and the Iraq Study Group, which issued a damning report on the war, in 2006, made him suspi-

cious of the foreign-policy establishment. "The events of my twenties felt historic, but the people involved did not," he writes. "I wanted a hero—someone who could make sense of what was happening around me and in some way redeem it." Professional connections led him to the nascent Obama campaign. Rhodes showed that he could write under pressure and think against the conventional grain. He had found his hero.

Rhodes was a liberal idealist. He turned against the Iraq War, but not against American intervention to prevent mass atrocities around the world. He was strongly influenced by Samantha Power's book on genocide in the twentieth century, "A Problem from Hell." Power was an adviser in Obama's Senate office, and she and Rhodes became comrades in the Obama cause, with "a sense of destiny" about their work on the campaign and their place in "a movement that would remake the world order." Rhodes saw Obama as a symbol of aspiration for billions of people, including Muslims who had become alienated from the United States in the years since 9/11. He believed that the identity of the new President could transform America's relation to the rest of the world.

Rhodes drafted a speech for Obama to give in Cairo in June of 2009, outlining the difficulties with the Muslim world and promising a new start. "It expressed what Obama believed and where he wanted to go, the world that *should be*," Rhodes writes. Eighteen months later, the Arab Spring began. Rhodes quotes a Palestinian-born woman telling him that Obama was its inspiration: "The young people saw him, a black man as president of America, someone who looked like them. And they thought, why not me?" A more seasoned adviser might have been skeptical, but Rhodes lets this dubious claim stand. His firsthand experience of the rest of the world came from the huge crowds that he saw through bulletproof glass lining the route of Obama's motorcade in Lima and in Hiroshima, from the young people who posed earnest questions at town-hall meetings in Ramallah and Mumbai. He took them as evidence of the tide of progress.

Rhodes and Power were among the White House aides who wanted the United States to stand with the demonstrators in Tahrir Square. Obama

encouraged Rhodes to speak up more in meetings: “Don’t hold back just because it’s the principals. You know where I’m coming from. And we’re younger.” After Egypt came the American-led military intervention in Libya—prompted by Muammar Gaddafi’s threats to rebel-held Benghazi—which ended up toppling the dictator. The spring of 2011 was the high-water mark of Obama’s foreign policy: Osama bin Laden dead, American troops withdrawn from Iraq and preparing to leave Afghanistan, the Arab Spring in full flower. “Barack Obama’s story was gaining a certain momentum,” Rhodes writes. “But something was missing—the supporting characters, in Congress and around the world.”

“The supporting characters”—Mitch McConnell, Vladimir Putin, Egyptian generals, Libyan warlords, reactionary forces that had no stake in Obama’s success—were in fact forces of opposition, and they weren’t just missing; they were gathering strength. You get the sense that Rhodes, and perhaps Obama, too, wasn’t ready for them. Relentless Republican obstruction didn’t fit with Obama’s tale of there being no red or blue America; rising chaos and nationalism were out of tune with his hymn of walls falling. In Libya, civil war killed thousands of people and left much of the country ungoverned and vulnerable to terrorists, and the U.S., as usual, had no plan or desire to deal with the aftermath of intervention. But Rhodes took the criticism that followed as a sign of the absurdity of American politics: “I couldn’t reconcile how much doing the right thing

didn’t seem to matter. . . . I thought it was right to save thousands of Libyans from Gaddafi, but we were now being second-guessed.”

The failure of the supporting cast to join the march of progress came as a kind of irrational affront: how could they be so impervious to the appeal of Obama’s example and words? “One of Barack Obama’s greatest frustrations during his time in the White House was his inability to use rhetoric and reason to better tell the story of his presidency,” Dan Pfeiffer, Obama’s communications director, tells us in another new White House memoir, “Yes We (Still) Can: Politics in the Age of Obama, Twitter, and Trump” (Twelve). Rhodes stuck to the ideals of the Arab Spring, but Obama was leaving him behind. “Our priority has to be stability and supporting the SCAF (Egyptian Military Council),” he snapped at Rhodes in one meeting. “Even if we get criticized. I’m not interested in the crowd in Tahrir Square and Nick Kristof.” This sounded like cold realpolitik, and it came as a shock to Rhodes: “For the first time, I felt out of step with my boss.”

It got worse with the Syrian civil war. Rhodes again supported American military intervention, but without much faith, and Obama half-listened to Rhodes’s half-hearted arguments. “It was wrenching to read about the brutality of Assad every morning, to see images of family homes reduced to rubble,” he writes. “I felt we had to do *something* in Syria.” In August of 2013, Bashar al-Assad killed hundreds of civilians with chemical weapons, and the White House de-

bated whether to punish the regime for crossing Obama’s stated “red line.” The President decided to leave the decision to Congress, which meant no military action. “It will drive a stake through the heart of neoconservatism,” he told his advisers. “Everyone will see they have no votes.” Obama regarded this decision as a clever tactical win, as if exposing Republican hypocrisy mattered more than trying to prevent another gas attack in Syria. He was willing to follow the logic of inaction as far as it led. “Maybe we never would have done Rwanda,” he told Rhodes during the Syria crisis. “There’s no way there would have been any appetite for that in Congress.” For Obama idealists, this stance was apostasy. “‘A Problem from Hell’” turned out to be one of the least relevant foreign-policy books for the Obama White House.

Rhodes had to choose between sticking with the principles that originally drew him to Obama and continuing to identify with his hero. He went with the latter. When Egyptian generals overthrew the elected Islamist government, and the Administration refused to call it a coup, Rhodes made one last pitch for Arab democracy, but “as with intervention in Syria, my heart wasn’t entirely in it anymore.” It’s hard to blame him. There was no obvious policy that could have reversed the Egyptian coup or, short of a full-scale military invasion, forced the departure of Assad. Worse to try and likely leave a bigger mess, Obama concluded, than not to try at all. Other voices—Secretary of State John Kerry; the national-security adviser, Susan Rice—argued for more American activism, but Obama was unmoved. Without congressional or allied support, without a clear answer to the question “And what happens after we bomb the runways and Russia, Iran, and Assad rebuild them?,” he dropped “Never again” for a more skeptical motto: “Don’t do stupid shit.” Rhodes adopted the more minimalist words and ideas, though never with the same equanimity as his boss. “It was as if Obama was finally forcing me to let go of a part of who I was.”

“The World as It Is” charts the education of Ben Rhodes through his White House years from liberal idealism to a chastened appreciation of how American power can be more wisely harnessed



“Yeah, the rooftop-farming idea isn’t working out.”



to limited ends—hence the title. With Obama’s encouragement, Rhodes spent the last years of the Presidency trying to realize his original ideals through diplomacy. He took the lead in talks with Cuba that achieved normalized relations after more than half a century of Cold War hostility. He helped prevent Congress from sinking the Iran nuclear deal. He involved himself in humanitarian issues in Southeast Asia. He became more emphatic in his contempt for the Washington establishment (although I’m not sure what makes you a member if not eight years in the White House), and he became a high-profile target of the conspiratorial right wing. Rhodes concludes his book with the thought that “billions of people around the globe had come to know Barack Obama, had heard his words, had watched his speeches, and, in some unknowable but irreducible way, had come to see the world as a place that could—in some incremental way—change. The arc of history.”

That’s more qualified than the sense of high destiny with which Rhodes set out, but it’s still a story of progress, of the philosophy that he ascribes to both the chef Anthony Bourdain and Barack Obama: “If people would just sit down and eat together, and understand something about each other, maybe they could figure things out.” Yet Rhodes was still fighting the last war against the tired Washington establishment, the reflexive hawks, the carping ignoramuses in the media. Meanwhile, in places as far-flung as Turkey, India, the Czech Republic, Moscow, and Washington, the strongest political forces were running dead against the idea of sitting down together over a meal and figuring things out.

After Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, the burden of proof is on anyone who would make the case for military action as a force for good. But Obama, proudly defying political convention and confident in the larger forces of progress, was reluctant to acknowledge that inaction, too, is an action. We don’t know what a missile strike against Assad in 2013 might have achieved, but we do know what followed Obama’s refusal to enforce his own red line: more Syrian government atrocities (including the repeated use of chemical weapons), millions more Syrian refugees, the shift

of European politics to the populist right, an emboldened Russia intervening militarily in Syria. It turned out that prudent inaction didn’t necessarily further the cause of progress any more than a naïve confidence in overt action. When America sobered up under Obama, other powers saw not wisdom but a chance to fill the gap.

Obama doesn’t seem to have known what to make of Vladimir Putin: “He neither liked nor loathed Putin, nor did he subscribe to the view that Putin was all that tough.” This dusting-off-the-shoulder attitude underestimated the Russian leader’s ambition to manipulate the resentments and hatreds of democratic citizens. Obama told Rhodes that he knew all about the Putins of the world—from the Tea Party, Fox News, and the Republican extremists who had been trying from the start to delegitimize his Presidency. “Obama was more sanguine about the forces at play in the world not because he was late in recognizing them,” Rhodes writes, “but because he’d seen them earlier.” Obama had come to think that he could work around Putin and McConnell and Fox News, by picking his shots, setting the right example, avoiding stupid shit, and bringing change in increments.

In fact, he was too sanguine, perhaps because he was overconfident in his own transformative power, perhaps because he wasn’t alert to the brittleness of his achievement. Progressives find it hard to imagine that there are others who in good faith don’t want the better world they’re offering and will fiercely resist it. Obama was always better at explaining the meaning of democracy than at fighting its opponents. Other than “Yes, we can” and a few other phrases, it’s hard to remember any lines from his speeches, including ones drafted by Rhodes. Many of them are profound meditations that can stand reading and rereading—Rhodes quotes some of the best—but Obama’s way was to rise above simplifications that would have stuck in people’s heads and given them verbal weapons with which to defend themselves.

His aversion to the dirty tasks of politics culminated in the moment during the 2016 campaign when U.S. intelli-

gence about Russian meddling on behalf of Trump reached the Oval Office. Obama’s instinct was to avoid politicizing it at all costs. Rhodes urged the President to be more vocal, just as he’d urged him to intervene in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, but Obama replied, “If I speak out more, he’ll just say it’s rigged.” Trump,

if he lost, was going to say the election had been rigged regardless. His supporters were going to disbelieve anything Obama said. The rest of us deserved to hear it, anyway. “I talk about it every time I’m asked,” Obama protested to Rhodes, concerning the issue of Russian interference. “What else are we going to do?” He wasn’t

going to worry about it, true to character; Rhodes, true to character, did the worrying instead, and still does.

In “The Final Year,” a new documentary that focusses on Obama’s foreign policy at the end of his Presidency, Trump’s victory leaves Rhodes unable to speak for almost a full minute. It had been inconceivable, like the repeal of a law of nature—not just because of who Trump was but also because of who Obama was. Rhodes and Obama briefly sought refuge in the high-mindedness of the long view—“Progress doesn’t move in a straight line,” Rhodes messaged his boss on Election Night, a reference to one of Obama’s own sayings, which the President then revived for the occasion: “History doesn’t move in a straight line, it zigs and zags.” But that was not much consolation. On Obama’s last trip abroad, he sat quietly with Rhodes in the Beast as they passed the cheering Peruvian crowds. “What if we were wrong?” Obama suddenly asked. Rhodes didn’t know what he meant. “Maybe we pushed too far. Maybe people just want to fall back into their tribe.” Obama took the thought to its natural conclusion: “Sometimes I wonder whether I was ten or twenty years too early.”

Rhodes wrestled with this painful blow. It sounded like a repudiation of everything they had done. But then he found an answer, and it was in keeping with the spirit of his years in service to Obama: “We were right, but all that progress depended upon him, and now he was out of time.” ♦



## SKINNY SUBLIMITY

*Giacometti at the Guggenheim.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

There might not seem to be much left to say about Alberto Giacometti, the subject of a majestic, exhausting retrospective—pace yourself, when you go—at the Guggenheim. Critics, scholars, philosophers, poets, journalists, and chatty amateurs have all had a go at the Swiss master of the skinny sublime. I wrote about him in these pages seventeen years ago, on the occasion of a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. A standard story of Giacometti, as a Surrealist who became a paragon of existentialism for his ravaged response to the Second World War, was well established by 1966, when he died, at the age of sixty-four. He hasn't changed. The world has, though, and with it the significance of a man who termed himself a failure and chose to live in bohemian squalor even while, in his later years, he was quite rich and famous. A rather sudden consensus of people who keep score regarding canons has come to rank the legendary eccentric as the world's greatest modern sculptor after Rodin—despite fair quibbles in favor of Brancusi or the moonlighting feats of the painters Picasso, Matisse, and de Kooning. The taste leaders are wealthy people, with exegetes in their wake. Why Giacometti? What is he to 2018 and 2018 to him?

Since 2010, three bronze figures by Giacometti—in each case, one in an edition of casts from an original work in plaster or clay—have become the first, second, and third most expensive sculptures ever sold. The titleholder is “Man Pointing” (1947), an almost six-foot-high slender figure extending an index finger, which Giacometti said he had made, against a show deadline, “in one night

between midnight and nine the next morning,” and which fetched more than a hundred and forty-one million dollars at Christie's in 2015. Auction antics hardly amount to historical verdicts, but, these days, trying to ignore the market when discussing artistic values is like trying to communicate by whisper at a

*Giacometti at Galerie Maeght, in Paris, in 1961.*

Trump rally. Giacometti's work surely deserves its price tags, if anything of strictly subjective worth ever does. The bad effect is a suppressed acknowledgment of his strangeness.

Giacometti was born in 1901 in a rustic valley near the border of Italy, the son of a professional painter. His younger brother, the shy and taciturn Diego, remained a close companion throughout

his life. Committed to art from childhood, Giacometti moved to Paris in 1922, briefly pursuing academic study and experimenting in modes of classical, ancient Egyptian, Cycladic, and African art. A generically Fauvist portrait of Diego painted that year pictures a dapper, stiffly alert young man, standing straight in a way that feels faintly prophetic of Giacometti's eventual sculpture. At the Guggenheim, it is the first in a terrific selection of paintings and drawings that have raised my opinion of his two-dimensional work, which unfortunately is far better known for the monotonous and largely mud-colored monochrome, ritualistic portraits from his later years, for which he demanded

direct gazes from his sitters as he excavated their heads in pictorial space. Most of those portraits feel like relics, rather than expressions of the artist's intense scrutiny, though a few—notably, of his wife, Annette Arm, and his last mistress, a spirited prostitute called Caroline—fight through with hollow-eyed looks that assert independence from the artist. (The departure suggests love, an emotion flickeringly rare in Giacometti.) But the show turns up pictures, especially still-lives, whose lyricism is as surprising as birds escaping a magician's top hat.

The lyrical was a note out of key with Giacometti's drive to capture essences of human reality as it confronted, or, better, assaulted, his consciousness. That goal was fundamentally so impossible as to be comic, but his ordeal in its pursuit—materialized in the bodily scimmages of his sculpture—conveys a desperate sincerity. Sculpting from models or imagination, his hand ate away flesh to register how,

instead of in what form, people existed for him, whether in pride or abjection, in loneliness or resilience—perhaps ridiculous, perhaps frightening. Sometimes his quest for a likeness beyond appearance came literally to nothing: scraps of material fallen to the studio floor. The drive is an irresistible force of ambition colliding with an immovable conviction of inadequacy.



He has a plausible avatar in Sisyphus.

Giacometti's dedication is what rivets us to him and has reliably come, should money be involved, to break the bank—a spiritual gold standard for a time of nervous suspicion that art's prestige has out-run its supply lines of meaning. His single-mindedness marked his friendships with the leading artists and intellectuals in his milieu, including Picasso. He disparaged the Spaniard for a virtuosity not yoked to a consistent passion. Picasso parried by mocking the apparent repetitiveness of the gaunt figures that had become the exclusive focus of Giacometti's sculpture during his war years in Switzerland—a bum rap, as this show proves. A skillful installation sensitizes you to myriad variations in the character of works that only at first glance appear not to differ much except in size, from minuscule to monumental. Nearly always, but most expressively when painted, they emerge from family resemblance, with some distinctive nuance. Each inhabits its own present tense.

Giacometti's uniqueness was detectable already, in the early nineteen-thirties, when he embraced the sexual manias of Surrealism and veered between the opposed coteries of the movement, led by the sentimental André Breton and the cynical Georges Bataille. Giacometti took to creating only works that, he said, he had visualized in advance, in forms and styles that hopscotched from primitivist to abstract and from sweetly poetic to viciously aggressive. His finely crafted wooden "Disagreeable Object" (1931)—suggesting a tapered dildo with eyes at one end and spikes at the other—vies for the honor of being the single ugliest thing ever made, and his "Woman with Her Throat Cut" (1932)—while a tour de force of sculptural mastery—the most disturbing. About three feet long, meant to be set on a floor, "Woman" conjoins elements suggestively animal, vegetal, and mechanical to represent a woman arched in a paroxysm of orgasm and, her neck notched, death. (Viewed distantly, across the Guggenheim's atrium, it evokes a squashed bug.) Misogynous? Oh boy. Giacometti confessed at the time to having had compulsive fantasies of rape and murder, though "Woman" seems to have used up the pathology as an overt motive in his art.

He was ridden with phobias of death,

darkness, and open spaces. His friend Simone de Beauvoir—the subject here of three heads, each sporting a turban—recalled "a long period," in 1941, "when he could not walk down a street without putting out a hand and touching the solid bulk of a wall in order to arm himself against the gulf that yawned all around him." Infertile from an adolescent bout of mumps, he was often impotent except with prostitutes, whom, for their detachment, he termed "goddesses." He remained emotionally attached to his mother, visiting her regularly in Switzerland until her death, in 1964, two years before his fatal heart attack. He met Annette Arm in Geneva in 1943 and seems to have married her six years later because she insisted on it and showed herself willing to subordinate herself to him, come what may. They lived to the end in a plaster-spattered Montparnasse studio that another friend, Jean Genet, described as "a milky swamp, a seething dump, a genuine ditch." Giacometti was a voluble and, by all accounts, enchanting conversationalist, humbly courteous, whose most frequent topic happened to be the hopelessness of his enterprise. He took long walks with a friend who knew the feeling—Samuel Beckett—reportedly in mutual silence.

Giacometti quit Surrealism in 1935 and went back to working from life, with fumbling uncertainty during the next ten years. The gestation of his ultimate manner accorded in date and in feeling with the catastrophe of the war. In Switzerland, the harder he worked to mold heads and figures, the more they crumbled and shrank, to the point that, when he returned to Paris, he could transport many of the works in matchboxes. He reported having a life-changing epiphany, in 1946, on leaving a movie theatre, when the abrupt shift from the film projection to an engulfing street ignited a sense that, as he wrote, "I see reality for the first time but in such a way that I can make everything very rapidly." Some occult circuit had closed between what he saw and what he could make visible. For me, a spark leaps from that moment to the present day, a time of paralyzing anxieties and cascading illusions. Look around on Fifth Avenue when you leave the show. Something will be happening, perhaps to you. ♦



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Liza Donnelly, November 14, 1994

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## NIGHTMARE-TINTED TOYS

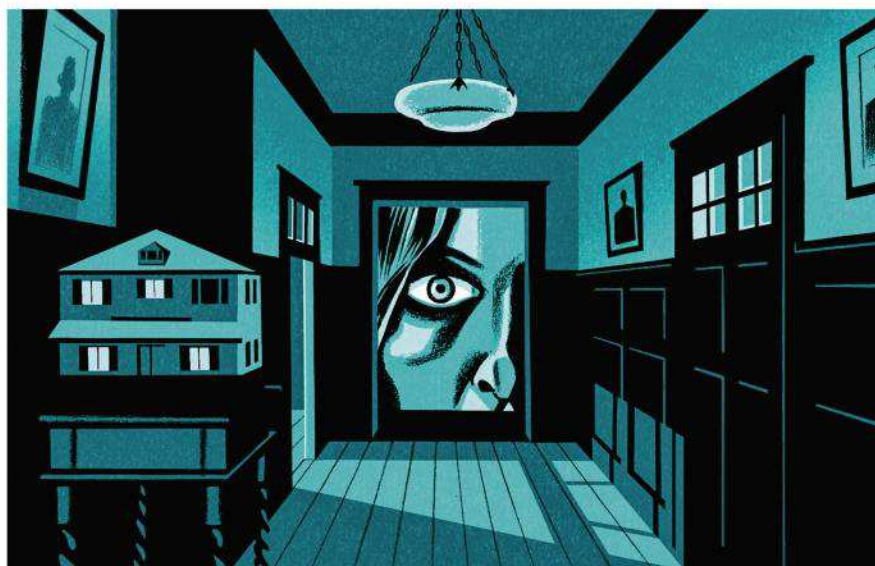
*"Hereditary."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

The scariest thing in "Hereditary," a movie well supplied with fear, is a noise. It's the one that you make by flicking your tongue down from the roof of your mouth: *klokk*. Most of us rarely do this, unless moved by a desire to mimic the hoofbeats of a horse, but Charlie Graham (Milly Shapiro), a non-smiling girl of thirteen, *klokks* with unnerving frequency.

a whisper in a cave. Scene after scene bears the hermetic rigor of a rite, one that outsiders—or even other members of the household—may struggle to understand.

This sense of enclosure, we come to realize, is a female preserve. Annie's husband, Steve, may have troubles, too (weighty ones, given that he's played by the ever-sombre Gabriel Byrne), but,



*In Ari Aster's film, a recently bereaved woman learns how to contact the dead.*

It's her signature sound, like the *bing!* emitted by the annoying guy in "Groundhog Day," and her brother, Peter (Alex Wolff), who's a few years older than Charlie, hears a *klokk* in the corner of his bedroom, after dark, even when she's not there.

Or, at any rate, he thinks he does. Most of the folks in the film, which is written and directed by Ari Aster, don't quite know what to believe, or how much they should trust their eyes and ears. The children's mother, Annie (Toni Collette), can't tell if her own emotions are correct. Her mother just passed away, and Annie is bemused, or half-ashamed, at feeling insufficiently sad. But then, as she admits at the funeral, her mother was a secretive person, possessed of "private rituals." That phrase echoes around the story like

in his case, the movie chooses not to pry. We never find out what he does for a living. Though Peter and his schoolmates observe their own customs, they do so gregariously, ganging together to smoke a bowl. About Charlie and Annie, on the other hand, we learn perhaps more than we would wish. Charlie solemnly scissored the head from a dead pigeon—Michael Haneke's "The White Ribbon" (2009) contains a similar avian outrage—and combines odds and ends to make nightmare-tinted toys. This charming gift of constructive improvisation is clearly inherited from Annie, who designs doll's houses, replicating her own experience in miniature. One room, say, features a tiny version of her late mother, dressed in a white

gown. Why, she could almost be alive!

Annie's other hobbies include majestic monologues, in which she lays bare the roots of her grievances and griefs. We are no longer used to long speeches in American cinema, but, even when in fashion, their purpose was to rouse or to denounce—think of George C. Scott at the start of "Patton" (1970), or Al Pacino's belligerent bellowing in "Scent of a Woman" (1992) and "Any Given Sunday" (1999). Annie, by contrast, sounds more like a fugitive from a Bergman film. As she recites her woes in a group-therapy session for the bereaved, or raves with indignation in front of Peter and Steve, tumbling over her words ("All I get back is that fucking face on your face"), the effect verges on the comic, and some of "Hereditary" can best be borne, or relieved, by means of a jittery laugh. The cruellest joke is delivered by the final credits, in which Judy Collins sings Joni Mitchell's breezy "Both Sides Now": "So many things I would have done/ But clouds got in my way." Indeed.

One result of the therapy is that Annie meets Joan (Ann Dowd), a fellow-mourner, warm and courteous, who teaches her how to contact the dearly departed. Joan contends that summoning the spirits of others is the most effective way to raise your own, and the séance, at her place, is a notably low-rent affair, its tools consisting of a table, a candle, a chalkboard, and a glass. When Annie goes home and proposes the same routine, Steve scoffs and sighs but, to placate her, goes along with it. Bad idea. Henceforth, the movie shifts from the disquieting to the freaky and, by the end, the absolutely nuts. Did I really see one figure self-decapitate with a length of wire, sawing briskly back and forth as if through a log? And another, reduced to carbonized flesh, apparently kneeling in prayer? Maybe I dreamed the whole thing, in the churning wake of the screening. One thing's for sure: requesting the presence of the dead is a risky business. You cannot predict which of them will show up, and in what mood. The road to Hell is paved with invitations.

Advance word on "Hereditary" told, or gabbled, of something more arresting than a regular fright night. And it's true that, if you enjoy a little spooking on the weekend, cheerfully spilling



your Raisinets in front of a skittish franchise (“Annabelle,” “The Conjuring,” “Insidious,” and so on), Aster’s movie will come across either as a challenging diversion from the norm or as an indulgence too far. It runs more than two hours, and whether it will conquer the multiplex as well as the art house remains to be seen. Although “The Witch,” an independent horror flick with a squirm power akin to that of “Hereditary,” brought in a handsome twenty-five million dollars when released in early 2016, a clunker like “The Conjuring 2,” which appeared a few months later, still earned four times as much nationwide.

Not that “Hereditary” is disloyal to the genre. No film in which a son hands the phone to his father and remarks, “Dad, it’s the cemetery,” can be said to break entirely fresh ground. The Grammys could easily improve their gloomy mood by investing in some hundred-watt light bulbs, but no: this is horror, and therefore the dinner table must be illuminated as dimly as a crypt. We get a blood-red glow, emanating from the children’s tree house, and borrowed from the eyelike windows in “The Amityville Horror” (1979). We get faces crawling with ants—an itchy spectacle, but no spookier than the bees that swarmed out of someone’s mouth in “Candyman” (1992). There’s also a sequence, early on, in which Annie, sorting through her mother’s stuff, picks up a volume entitled “Guide to Spiritualism,” which may not give the game away but certainly advertises what sort of game we can expect. Is this necessary? Were guests obliged to study “A Handbook to the Breeding of Large

Dogs” before going to stay with the Baskervilles?

One thing that does set “Hereditary” apart is the force of its cast. Milly Shapiro, despite having played the buoyant heroine of “Matilda,” on Broadway, forsakes any hint of joy in her depiction of Charlie, who strikes me as unreachably inward. Confronting her grandmother’s open casket, she doesn’t weep, or shy away, but bites into a candy bar with a loud, heretical snap. Meanwhile, in regard to Annie, it was gutsy of Toni Collette to take the part, given that she’s had less than twenty years to recover from “The Sixth Sense” (1999), and as the new film gets under way she looks stricken, like someone who has already weathered an ordeal. And yet, as in most of Collette’s performances, from “Muriel’s Wedding” (1994) onward, there’s a resilience, too, in those strong-boned features and that tough pragmatic gaze. She’s damned if she’s going to be a victim and nothing but.

Damned, unfortunately, is right. Aster means to petrify us, and he succeeds; I won’t forget the pale shape that lurks and scoots behind Peter, in the corner of the ceiling, like Spider-Man’s evil twin. And the expression on the poor lad’s face, at the climax of the tale, is one of genuine bewilderment, quivering with disbelief that his ordinary young life should have descended into the infernal. As for the music, I’d have to check with the composer, Colin Stetson, but it seems to be scored for violins, percussion, a humpback whale, and bats.

Here’s the thing, though. “Hereditary” is far more upsetting than it is frightening, and I would hesitate to recommend it to the readily traumatized.

(In Australia, the trailer was reportedly screened by mistake before a showing of “Peter Rabbit.” Sleep well, children!) For viewers recuperating from a wounded childhood, or from a festering relationship, it could scrape too close to the bone. The movie haunts us even when it isn’t making us jump, so intently are the characters bedeviled by the spectres of their past. “I’m not to be blamed,” Annie says in therapy, as she describes her mother’s legacy, before adding, in despair, “I am blamed.”

Should you want to measure the psychological disturbance at work here, try comparing “Hereditary” with “A Quiet Place.” That recent hit, for all its masterly shocks, is at bottom a reassuring film, introducing people who are beset by an external menace but more or less able to pull through because, as a team, they’re roped together with enough love to fight back. “Hereditary” is more perplexing. It has the nerve to suggest that the social unit is, by definition, self-menacing, and that the home is no longer a sanctuary but a crumbling fortress, under siege from within. That is why there are no doctors in Aster’s film, and no detectives, either, urgently though both are required; nor does a man of God arrive, as he does in “The Exorcist” (1973), to lay the anguish to rest. Nothing, in short, can help Annie, Steve, and the kids, and they sure can’t help themselves, stationed as they are inside their delicate doll’s house of a world. There is no family curse in this remarkable movie. The family is the curse. *Klokk.* ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Drew Dernavich, must be received by Sunday, June 17th. The finalists in the May 28th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the July 2nd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ..... ”

### THE FINALISTS



*“I’m still cleaning the glitter out of the truck.”*  
Gwyn Joy, Brooklyn, N.Y.

*“I also have a centaur, but it makes people uncomfortable.”*  
Yacov Freedman, Atlanta, Ga.

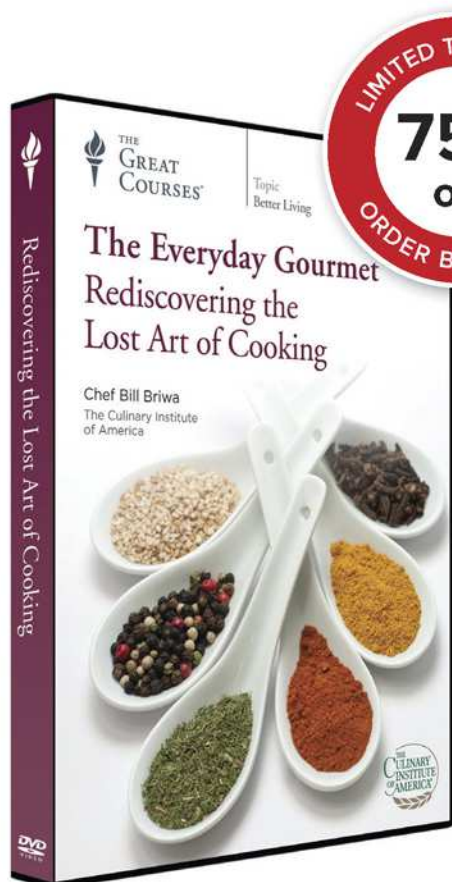
*“Well, of course they don’t exist. Now.”*  
Francesca Walsh, Bray, Ireland

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“His words, not mine.”*  
Jack Buchignani, Los Angeles, Calif.





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